

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by HARRY HARRISON

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HARLAN ELLISON

The Steel Napoleon

RAYMOND F. JONES

Stay off the Moon!

ROGER ZELAZNY

King Solomon's Ring

LEIGH BRACKETT

The Road to Sinharat

BEN BOVA

Answer, Please Answer



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NOVAS AND THE STEADY STATE

The vernacular of astronomy seems to provide a good source material for science fiction descriptions, going back to the dawn of SF life when John W. Campbell put the "nova" label on outstanding stories. The entire catalog of astronomical descriptions has been used for magazine titles and, living or dead, magazines have been issued under fine names such as COMET, STAR, PLANET, GALAXY, NEBULA, NOVA and SATELLITE, while ORBIT, ROCKET and SPACE have been featured in many interesting ways.

So why not grab onto some of these labels to apply to the writers themselves? For "steady state", with a nod to Mr. Fred Hoyle who is the staunchest defender of this cosmic theory. I nominate Leigh Brackett, the perpetually-young wife of that other SF master, Edmond Hamilton. She sold her first story way back in 1940, and she is still writing them and keeping us happy with her fiction. THE ROAD TO SINHARAT is one of her best.

I can think of no more novaish type than Harlan Ellison, the gadfly of science fiction. As a fan he was young, enthusiastic, and knew no fear. He burst into pro-dom like a true nova, and his first story appeared in 1956. So did ten other stories, that same year. If you would like to find out how a totally unknown writer could write that many stories, not to mention sell them, first crack out of the barrel, then read THE STEEL NAPOLEON.

Probably the best known nova of recent date is Roger Zelazny who, very soon after appearing on the writing scene, rose to dazzling heights of popularity and showed a unique prize-winning ability that has certainly never been equaled or bested. A Zelazny story has impact and comes on strong, and if you would like to see what I'm talking about, then read KING SOLOMON'S RING.

And that is not all that you will find in this issue. There are stories by old master Raymond F. Jones, and new master Ben Bova.

Good reading!

HARRY HARRISON

GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

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stay
off
the

MOON!

By **RAYMOND F. JONES**

Illustrated by **FINLAY**



How do you fill a pipette and measure out a half

c.c. of hydrochloric acid into a test tube—

from a quarter million miles away?

THE real problem, of course, is not quite that simple. You don't literally fill a pipette or use a test tube; you activate metering circuits that force tiny, ground-glass plungers a measured distance in reagent pumps. You send signals that close some valves and open others, and apply heat and adjust tempera-

tures, and filter solutions, and send the product to a spectrometer that determines what you've got and how much.

Then you have to code it and get the information from the moon to earth.

James Cochran had seen the equipment work through hundreds of checkout analyses. But



he didn't understand it. He was a chemist, and he had drawn up the specifications for the chemical analyzers of the Prospector, but it had been the electronic boys who dreamed up the remote mechanization and the telemetry equipment that would allow him to sit before a complex panel at the Center and direct his chemical laboratory on the moon to learn what the moon was made of. Some of the light-headed technicians who worked on the project had dubbed it Operation Green Cheese, but Cochran had more respect for the complexity of the effort.

It was Sunday midnight. The beginning of countdown was forty hours away. Cochran's crew had finished the chemical checkout, but in the assembly hangar technicians still swarmed about the Prospector, giving final-check to the power and telemetry components.

Jim Cochran signed off the last of the check reports and dropped them in the slot for delivery to the Project Director. He turned off the lights over his own desk and went out to the hangar. Under the blaze of fluorescent lights the device looked like some monstrous insect. The differential housings over the worm-screw drives gleamed like a red, segmented carapace. The blue appendages of the solar cell boxes were extended as if in

some frantic appeal. The radar dish and the helical antenna extended mutely upward. And, like a furious proboscis, the exploratory drill, which would pierce the moon's skin to a depth of five hundred feet, seemed to gnaw at the concrete floor of the hangar.

Sam Jarvis, supervisor of electronic checkout, saw Jim Cochran enter and came over to him with a broad, weary grin. "AOK, so far! This package is going to be perfect. If only the rocket boys will set up a bird that will take it to the moon—"

"They'd better," said Jim. "I don't think I could ever go through this again if they dump the Prospector in the drink."

SAM turned back to look at the robot machine and the swarming technicians. "Yes, you could," he said. "All of us have gone through heartbreak time and again the past five years, watching them blow up, or fall back and burn in the atmosphere because the motors didn't ignite. Or seeing them get all the way to the moon and have some five-dollar transistor conk out. But we always have at it again. You will, too. You're new, but you're one of us now. You never back out when you've come this far."

Watching the Prospector, Jim knew Sam was right. It had taken some persuasion to bring him to this point, however. Until a

couple of years ago he had believed he would be content with ivory-tower plastics research for the rest of his life. The persuasion had been applied when Mary's brother, Allan Wright, had made the astronaut team.

Allan and Jim had grown up together. There was no other person Jim felt closer to except Mary and their two children. Allan had dreamed of space when they were kids, and when he was fifteen, he said, "I'm going out there. I don't know how. But, somehow, I'm going out there."

Now, he had been selected to captain the first Apollo voyage. He had been born for that purpose, he said.

But while he was still in the general pool of astronauts he had opened his campaign to get Jim into the space program. "They need the best brains they can get," Allan said. "You haven't got any right to sit in a musty old plastics lab while guys with half your ability try to get us into space. NASA will take you tomorrow!"

Jim didn't try to tell him that his plastics lab wasn't exactly musty, or that he didn't think of himself as one of the best brains in the country. But Mary sided with Allan; she was almost as excited about space as he was. In the end, Jim went to NASA. Within days, he had been assigned to head the development

of the Prospector chemical mechanization.

It had been something of a jolt to pull up all the roots he had so carefully put down for him and his family, and move to the hectic, bustling, space-frontier community of the Center. But he wasn't sorry. It put something new in the blood, something men had never known before.

Space!

The great Saturn lifted slowly, on a vast blossom of fire, with snowy lox streaming down its sides. Then it was gone, a twinkle of fire high above, among the stars. That was all.

Mary and Jim Cochran continued to stare at the fading twinkle, and finally they turned away. Allan had obtained permission to be in the blockhouse during the firing. It hadn't been necessary for Jim to be there. He didn't want to know the instant-by-instant telemetry reports which told whether or not the flight was successful. Sam or Allan would call him when they knew. That would be soon enough for him.

"Let's drive down to the beach and watch the moon from there," said Mary. "We can't just turn around and go home, like—like nothing had happened."

Jim smiled in the darkness. Mary was as eager as he was for the success of the flight. And she didn't have his fear of failure,

that kept him from wanting to know the maybe-yes, maybe-no indications that the telemetry would first show.

"Sure," he said, "that's a good place to watch it."

The moon.

THEY watched its reflection thrashing on the water as the breakers rolled across, under, and around it. It was the same image that men had watched and wondered about and feared—for a half million years. The first creatures that had any semblance of manhood had sat on their haunches on this same shore and watched the same moon and the same water.

And felt the same fears, Jim thought.

He didn't know whether it was fear or not, but there was some sense of awesome mystery that filled him when he looked at the moon. It had been that way all his life. He remembered how it was when he was a boy and he walked through the fields at night on his way home. He had to pass Cramer's Pond, and when the moon was up its light from the sky and its reflection from the pond seemed to fill the whole earth with a cold, silver light. He always hurried past the pond on such nights.

Mary felt it, too. "I wonder why the moon makes people feel the way they do."

"How does it make people feel?"

"Oh, kind of—kind of—you know!"

Jim laughed aloud. This was a typical Mary-Cochran explanation. But it told him all he needed to know. What she said was quite true. He *did* know.

The baying of dogs on a wintry, moonlit night.

The madness called lunacy.

Seeds must be planted just so, in relation to the moon, or the crop will fail.

Men had always felt strange things about the moon. Would a Saturn missile and a mechanical monster in its nose be able to destroy all that?

Jim started the car. "Let's get back. I've got to know how the flight's going!"

* * *

They were still in the block-house, but the tension was relaxed. They were talking and watching the meters and cathode ray tubes without the strain and fear of failure. Jim knew the answer even before Sam and Allan walked up to him and slapped him on the back.

"Where the devil did you go?" said Sam. "I thought you were going to be right behind me when we fired, and you weren't here at all!"

It's like your first baby, you want to be there, and you don't. Was it a good shot?"

"Was it a good shot?" Allan's face became ecstatic. "We've never had a better one. On course all the way!"

The Project Director, Emil Hennesey was behind them. His face was bleak. "I expected you to be here for the firing, Cochran," he said. "It seems to display little interest in your end of the project that you didn't feel it necessary to show up."

Jim looked at him steadily and shrugged without answer. Hennesey was one guy whose presence on the space team Jim couldn't figure out. He was an ex-Major, and he had no capacity for dreaming. Men, machines, transistors, rockets—they were all the same thing, merely objects to be made to obey.

"You are aware of your next sequence of duties, I trust?" said Hennesey.

Jim nodded curtly. "I'll be ready."

SIXTY-SIX hours to the moon. That's what it takes with marginal escape velocity and free-fall conditions. But it was really five hundred thousand years and sixty six hours, Jim thought. Surely there hadn't been a single hour in all that time when someone, somewhere on earth had not felt the longing to solve the secret mystery of the moon.

Now they were about to find

the answer. But what would they have when they found it? They would know that the surface dust of the moon consisted of certain percentages of silicates and oxides. They would know that the under layers were composed of rocks, maybe of granite or limestone or basalt. They would determine how much of each.

And then it would be over. The quest of the ages would be answered with a few simple statements that could be obtained in any high-school chemistry lab—if the lab were on the moon.

Jim Cochran felt there *had* to be more to it than that.

Why do hogs howl at the moon on winter nights?

Why do men say that madness of the mind is lunacy?

Why must planting be done in the right phase of the moon?

Little sleep was had by any of the crew during the next two nights, even though the instrument stage of the ship was now completely inert except for occasional telemetry signals that were fed to the computers for course checking and correction. The ship was simply falling on its own momentum.

Six hours before moonfall, activities in the tracking center accelerated and the tension increased. There was no question of hitting the moon; the landing had to be made safe for the cargo of instruments.

Jim Cochran watched the operators during this period. He told himself he didn't understand it, but he had actually learned a great deal of electronics during the past two years. He had had to in order to design and operate a chemical laboratory 240,000 miles away.

The television screens came on, showing the pock-marked surface of the moon as the ship orbited. The thrill and the fear of the great unknown began to rise in Jim's throat. By the silence in the room, he was sure the others sensed it, too.

Abruptly, the braking command was given and the ship began to fall out of orbit towards the planned landing in the Sea of Rains. On the screens, the images swelled as the ship plummeted faster. In one corner could be seen the spring-loaded extension legs, like those of some great spider. It seemed impossible that these could cushion the violent shock of landing.

The sudden surge of a retro rocket and the blast of moon dust blinded the television eye, but there was a sense of crazy, rocking, rolling motion. Then the eye went dead.

Jim almost cried out. The ship couldn't have crashed.

AN operator quickly switched controls and the screens came alive again. He turned a

dial slowly. The camera eye moved. It swept the craggy horizon and the nearby floor of the Sea of Rains. Others had seen this before, but it was the first time for Jim. He found himself pushing forward, drinking in the sight eagerly.

"The moon—the moon—" he said softly to himself. But the others heard it and they understood.

Signals were sent across space to collapse the landing legs and unfold the sides of the instrument cone like the leaves of a flower. The Prospector lay exposed to the environment for which it was built. Slowly, in response to other signals, the worm-screw drives, which had been retracted against the body of the vehicle, turned through an arc and lowered to the surface. Locked in position, the drive screws began turning slowly. The vehicle moved off the now-useless landing support and became an entity of its own.

The ungainly arms of the solar cells automatically oriented toward the sun; the antennas pointed toward earth. The scanning cameras in the turret of the Prospector took control of the video circuits and the turret slowly turned as the vehicle moved across the face of the moon. The landing support remained behind and slowly dwindled like some useless wreckage.

There was sudden pandemonium in the tracking center control room. The operators laid down their headsets and began pounding each other on the back, while ear-splitting Indian yells filled the air. Jim and Sam found themselves beating each other on the arms and yelling senselessly.

"We made it!" Sam cried. "We made it! We got your little old laboratory up there for you!"

* * *

There were hours of testing and calibration yet to be done before the Prospector could be used for its primary mission. Hundreds of electronic circuits had to be checked to see that they survived the takeoff and landing without becoming distorted or inoperative.

Jim went home for the rest of the night. When he returned the next morning Sam reported that all circuits were go, and the Prospector was his.

He had operated the laboratory in the Prospector many times, either on a mock-up or from this control panel while the Prospector was in the hangar. But he couldn't keep the faint tremor from his hand as he reached for the first control that would manipulate the machine on the moon.

The drill had been extended to operating position, but the head had not yet been energized. Jim touched it to the fine dust of the

floor of the Sea of Rains. The drill went quickly to a depth of eighteen inches in the dust before it struck something firmer.

"That kills the theory about eighty feet of that stuff, anyway," said Sam as he read the instruments.

Jim was not interested in depth at this time. He fed some of the surface material into the laboratory and set the controls to run the preprogrammed analysis. They waited minutes; then the analysis began to appear in cryptic symbols on a paper tape.

Jim glanced at it and frowned.

"What's the matter? Isn't it working right?" Sam asked anxiously.

Jim hesitated. "It indicates the presence of several silicates, some carbonates, and a high percentage of oxides. These are mostly of sodium, calcium, and iron, as you might expect. But there's something wrong with your calibration. The atomic and molecular characteristics aren't coming through right."

"The boys ran checks on the standard samples aboard the Prospector last night," said Sam. "The results tallied exactly. I'll show you the tapes."

JIM waited, puzzled, while Sam brought up the check tapes. When he saw them, he shook his head. "There's a standard calcium carbonate sample carried

aboard the Prospector. Here's a calcium carbonate picked off the surface. You can see the difference yourself. The nominal analysis is the same, but the atomic weights and the energy levels are just slightly different. That doesn't make sense unless your circuits are out of calibration."

"Let's run another standard sample," said Sam.

Within a few minutes the calibration check has been repeated. Jim held up the tape. Sam peered over his shoulder. "Just like the first one," said Sam. "Nothing's wrong with the circuits. Maybe you've got some new stuff there, that's never been identified before."

"That's hardly possible," said Jim. "There aren't any new elements in the places where sodium and calcium and silica are supposed to be. Yet, I don't understand how this can be. If the atomic weights are different, and the energy levels are different, they have to be different elements. It doesn't make sense."

"Well, why don't we push on," said Sam, "that is, if you've completed the surface sampling in this spot. Some samples at lower depths may give other indications."

Jim agreed. He drove the drill deeper into the face of the moon. At ten-foot intervals he removed samples and ran them through the analyzer. The results were

the same down to the hundred-foot level. All results showed common chemical elements with slightly variant atomic characteristics.

Which made them *different* chemical elements!

After six hours, Jim stood up from the console and shook his head wearily. "It's no good, Sam. There's something wrong that I can't put my finger on. If it isn't in the circuits, I don't know where it is. But these readings just aren't right. There's no use going deeper until we find out where the error is."

Sam's face was somber. "There just isn't any error. There can't be. Unless it was made by whoever put the moon together—"

"Please make a complete check of every analyzer and telemetry circuit tonight, and we'll try again tomorrow. I want to think about this."

* * *

He thought about it, and he dreamed about it. And along about three o'clock in the morning he sat bolt upright in bed and stared at the dim moonlight on the opposite wall of the bedroom.

It wasn't possible, he told himself audibly. It just wasn't possible!

Mary stirred and leaned on one elbow beside him. "What's the matter. Are you having nightmares?"

"Yeah—yeah, I guess I am. I'll be back in a minute, honey." He got up and padded to the door. "I've got to make a phone call."

"At this time of night?"

But Jim was gone. He turned on the hall light and dialed Sam's number. After a long time Sam answered sleepily.

"Wake up!" said Jim. "I've just figured it out!"

"Who the devil?—Oh, it's you, Jim. Figured out what? Do you know what time it is."

"Do you know the results of your calibration re-check?"

"How would I know that? I've got the night crew on it, but I didn't ask them to report to me in the middle of the night. Go back to bed, and let's talk about it in the morning."

"They're not going to find anything wrong, Sam."

"I could have told you that."

"But the elements of the moon are different—and there's only one explanation."

"What?"

"Think about it a minute, Sam. We take a spectrograph of the sun, and we find the same elements that are here on earth. We turn it on Alpha Centauri and find the same thing. We turn it to the farthest stars we can find that give enough light to record by. Always the same. Calcium is calcium, whether it's on the earth or on a star a half billion light years away."

"So?" Sam's voice was tired, and he sounded as if he was listening only because Jim was too good a friend to tell to go to hell for calling in the middle of the night.

"So? So what?" Sam repeated.

"So we go to the moon," said Jim, "and all of a sudden calcium isn't calcium, and the sodium on the moon isn't the same as the sodium on earth and on the sun and on Alpha Centauri and the stars a half billion light years away. Don't you see what that means!"

"No, I guess not," said Sam dully. "Maybe in the morning—"

"It means the moon just doesn't belong, Sam! It means the moon is completely foreign to anything in the Solar System, in the whole galaxy—in any galaxy we have been able to analyze. It means the moon has come from somewhere else, from a region of space where atoms and electrons are not even the same as atoms and electrons here. It must be a somewhere that's so far away it's beyond the edge of space as we know it!"

"I'll get dressed and come over," said Sam.

MARY made chocolate and toast, and they sat around the kitchen table thinking and talking of the awesome implications of Jim's theory.

"If what you say is true," said

Sam, "it might be that the slightest contact with any substance of the moon would be sheer poison to a human being. A returning vessel could never be permitted to enter the earth's atmosphere, and decontamination would become one of the major branches of science."

"That's entirely possible. It would complicate enormously the problems of establishing a moon-base. A speck of moondust inside the base might be as lethal as an unshielded reactor."

Mary was looking out the kitchen window toward the thin crescent of moon that was setting over the city. She thought of Allan, who would soon be voyaging to that alien world. "It's like a trap up there in the sky. We should never have tried to reach it."

"No—it's not like that at all," said Jim vigorously. "We'll solve whatever problems we find there. But think of it! We don't have to build a ship capable of crossing billions of light years of space to see what's out there. Something from out there has come to us and parked right in our own front yard. We have a thousand times more reason to go now!"

Sam toyed with his toast and dunked it in the chocolate. "I think you ought to keep it quiet—until we really *know*, don't you."

"Why? I'll run some more

tests, sure. I'll plug every loop-hole there can possibly be. But unless I find something new I'm going to announce it. Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't think Hennesey will like it, for one thing. Too sensational. Even when we actually land there and confirm your analyses by on-the-spot checks—it's still only a theory that the moon doesn't belong to this galaxy. You'll never be able to prove that."

"What we've found already is proof enough!"

"Not for Hennesey. He'll ask to see the shipping manifest by which the moon was transferred here. You know Hennesey."

"Sure, I know Hennesey," said Jim bitterly. "And he doesn't count. Not in something like this. This is big, and important, and I'm going to announce it. I want the credit for discovering it. It'll be called Cochran's Theory, and some University will offer me at least an honorary Ph.D. Is that bad?"

Sam shook his head. "Of course it's not bad. But I wonder what the public reaction will be like, and how about Congress—especially if this business about possible poisoning from moon-dust turns out to be correct? There might be a lot of pressure to cut funds and maybe cancel the whole moon project."

"If moondust is lethal, there's

no better time to be warned against it than right now!"

HE SPENT the following week, eighteen hours a day, at the chemical analysis panel in the tracking station. As long as the moon was above the horizon, day or night, he kept experiments going—checking, rechecking, calibrating, searching for loopholes.

There were no loopholes. There was no malfunction of equipment. The atoms of the moon's elements were not the same as those of the rest of the galaxy.

When Allan next came to visit on leave from his own station, Jim told him what had been found. Allan's face paled a little as he listened in awe to the story. He stood up and paced across the room as Jim finished.

"I always knew there would be something—something extra in this," he said. "You look up at night and you know the moon can't be just another piece of earth. Now—you've found out what it is!"

"How far could it have come? How old can it be? Imagine stepping out onto a world so old, from so far away!"

"You haven't heard it all," said Mary tensely.

"There's more?"

"They think perhaps the slightest touch of moon substance may be lethal."

"We don't know," said Jim

hastily. "It's a thought that Sam advanced. But I think it's quite possible. We won't know until we can run animal tests. But special precautions will have to be taken to decontaminate the Apollo after you re-enter with your space-suits."

"This will mean engineering changes. Are they under way?"

"I haven't announced my theory yet. But the necessary changes to provide for decontamination will have to be made."

"I wanted this as much as you," said Mary. "But now it's gone all wrong. We should have gone on dreaming about the moon and let it be a dream that never came true. I'm afraid of it now. No man should set foot on something so alien and so different."

Allan put an arm around her shoulders and shook her gently. "Sis! What kind of talk is that? You're talking to the guy who's going to be the first one to put his foot on the moon."

FROM the mountain of data accumulated in his experiments, Jim wrote his paper. Hennesey could control the publication of any material based on space experiments to the extent that they affected national security. But even he could not find a means to extend a security blanket to cover a theory of extra-galactic origin of the moon.

He raged at Jim, however. "You'll make a laughing stock of us in every scientific center of the world! You can't publish a ridiculous thing like this!"

"No one will laugh if he reads the data I've got to present," said Jim. "Every member of our staff who knows the subject has verified that the data are correct. The conclusion is inescapable."

"I can't forbid publication, Cochran," said Hennesey, "but I think it is very unwise for you to go ahead. Very unwise."

"I'll take that risk," said Jim.

He sent the paper to the Journal of Astro-physics. At the same time he sent an announcement to the major news services.

He had expected some sensationalism in the reporting. There was more than he bargained for. Some of the headlines that followed were:

"Savant Says Moon is Messenger from Outer Space."

"Moon Will Poison Earth."

"Moon Trip—One Way only."

The reactions in the upper echelons of NASA were almost as bad—in their own way. No thought had ever been given to a need for complete decontamination of astronauts and equipment after exposure on the moon. The requirement, if admitted, would threaten the entire program in the minds of some of the engineers. Others admitted it was tough, but thought they could

solve it in an extra year or so. Rumblings were heard echoing down from Congressional halls. Why hadn't the stupid scientists known in the beginning that this was necessary? Always bungling things—

In the end, it was Alan himself who came up with a proposal that kept the project from bogging down and still provided some measure of protection against the possible menace. He suggested a plastic outer suit to be fitted over the space suit and discarded as the astronaut re-entered the space vehicle. With care, such a procedure could prevent direct contact with moon-dust. In the meantime, it was hoped that robot vehicles could bring back moon samples before the Apollo was sent out.

This rather mild proposal did much to calm the furor in NASA and contractor engineering circles and soon the press had abandoned it for other, more sensational stories. But Hennesey and a number of other officials didn't forget. Some of them believed Jim Cochran was a charlatan at worse and an incompetent at best. They considered he had degraded American science with his fantastic theory.

Scientific judgement was being held in abeyance until actual moon samples were available on earth. For the present, at least one of Jim's predictions had come

true. The hypothesis was becoming known as Cochran's Theory. That it was also called Cochran's Idiocy by a few didn't matter.

Jim continued his own sixteen-hour stints at the analyzer controls, probing in a wide pattern over the floor of the Sea of Rains, and striking deeper toward the heart of the moon with each probe.

Probing to such great depths was made possible by a development that didn't even exist when the Prospector design was begun. Then, it was hoped that penetration to a foot and a half of the moon's surface might be possible. Five-hundred-foot holes were only a madman's nightmare. How could you carry such drilling equipment all the way to the moon?

Then, in the last months of Prospector design, laser devices had been produced, capable of burning holes in a diamond. It was only a small step, then, to the design of a drilling head which mounted a cluster of laser beams. These would literally burn their way toward the heart of the moon.

THE laser drilling head was lowered on five hundred feet of minute cable, which had tremendous tensile strength. The vaporized moon substance boiled out of the hole and condensed above the surface, settling as

fine dust. As the hole deepened, the condensation products coated the upper portions of the hole and the cable. To keep the hole from thus being closed, the cable was vibrated at a frequency that shook loose the condensing rock products, and the laser head was raised with beams shooting upward to clear the hole.

Jim found that a very special technique was required to raise and lower the head at the proper intervals to keep the hole clear and prevent loss of the drilling head. A spare was carried, but he didn't want to face the loss of even one. After three weeks, he felt confident in his operation and began lowering the drilling head to depths of two hundred and three hundred feet.

As he had expected, along with the lunar geologists who were participating, the moon showed a definite pattern of stratification. But the differences between the layers seemed slight. Chalky, calcium compounds were abundant. Some were powdery; others were pressed into brittle limestone formations. No really hard rocks such as granite were encountered, however. The boundaries between layers were ill-defined. No one knew what to make of it. The observations were interesting. Explanations were wholly lacking.

Then, after five weeks of probing, on the edge of the four-hun-

dred-foot level, Jim found something new. He sought out Sam at the end of the day.

"A few years ago," he said, "scientists were startled to find chemicals that were the product of life, inside meteors from outer space."

"I understand they've even found bacteria which they have been able to bring to life," said Sam.

Jim nodded. "More than four hundred feet deep on the moon I've found the same kind of chemicals—hydrocarbons that must be the product of living cells."

"Four hundred feet deep on the moon—" said Sam musingly. "And maybe the moon came from billions of billions of light years across space. So wherever it came from there was something living. What is it? Traces of bacteria, or chemical remains of plant life like our coal mines?"

Jim shook his head. "I don't know yet. I'm not sure we can find out until we go there. But, as you say, it means the moon was once the scene of life—wherever it came from."

"One thing I haven't understood," said Sam, "is why the moon stopped here if it had been traveling through space for so long. Why didn't it keep on going?"

"It was just a combination of factors," said Jim. "The moon

happened to be traveling at just the right speed. The earth was in just the right place at the right time. As a result, the moon fell into an orbit around the earth. Pure accident."

"A lucky accident!" said Sam.

Jim looked up at the pale moon above their heads as they walked toward the parking lot. "I hope so," he said. "We will soon know whether it was a lucky or an unlucky accident."

THE moon laboratory had not been designed for extensive organic chemical analysis. There were only a few things it could do with organic compounds. But these were sufficient to convince Jim that the moon had once been the scene of life.

Why so deep? he wondered. Nothing had been found in the upper levels, unless he had missed it—he would have to check that out later.

As the drilling head moved slowly downward, the evidence of fossil hydrocarbons increased. There seemed to be an almost geometric increase in concentration after he passed the four-hundred-foot level. He was certain the drill was penetrating a bed of fossil remains of some form of life that flourished the little planet that the moon must have been incalculable eons ago.

The more he thought about his

theory, however, the more difficult it became to explain all the factors. If the moon had actually been a planet of some far distant system, what had torn it loose from its parent sun and sent it careening through space? Had its sun exploded, blasting whatever planets the system held into the depths of space? Such an occurrence might explain the sterility of the moon's surface, but why was the evidence of life buried so deep? Perhaps the upper layers of the moon's surface consisted of debris blasted from the exploding sun. Such debris would have been molten, flowing about the moon's surface, cremating everything living. Finally, it would have shrunk in the cold depths of space and wrinkled into the vast mountains and cracks that laced the moon's surface.

It was one way it could have happened, but it seemed so fantastic that Jim had difficulty in convincing himself that it was true.

He doubted the accuracy of his analyses. There were so many tenuous links between the substance on the moon and his own senses that an error in any one of them could destroy the accuracy of the results. But he had no reason to doubt.

He began making calibration checks before and after every analysis. It added scores of hours

to his work. Sam sat beside him, checking and verifying the accuracy of the telemetering circuits constantly. The operation was as foolproof as their science could make it.

"You've got to believe what you find," said Sam. "There's no other answer."

And then, one day, Jim found an answer that was utterly impossible to believe. His mind balked and closed up completely at the thought.

Sam had been watching him for almost three hours, aware that something had perturbed Jim exceedingly. Sam kept his mouth shut and leaned quietly against the desk of his own console, keeping check on the circuits while he watched Jim grow more and more distressed. Sam didn't understand the processes, but he was aware that Jim had been going over and over the same analysis for almost two hours. At last Jim's face seemed to go utterly white, and his hands became motionless on the console.

Sam waited a long time. Then he asked, "What is it, Jim? What's the matter?"

Jim continued to stare at the panels of the console, then answered as if from some far nightmare distance. "Two chemicals, Sam," he said. "One of them a big molecule, something like hemoglobin. And neither of them

could exist as fossils. Their structure would have broken down long ago. They could exist only in *live tissue!*"

He continued staring. Neither of them moved. Sam felt as if he had just heard something in a nightmare and had only to wait a minute until he woke up. Then it would be gone.

Jim turned his head at last and faced Sam. He gave a short, harsh bark of a laugh that sounded half-hysterical.

"We'd be off our rockers, wouldn't we Sam? Clear off our rockers to believe there could be something alive five hundred feet inside the moon!"

"Sure—and if it were alive, it wouldn't be sitting still while the laser beams drilled a hole into it. Besides, we just couldn't be lucky enough to lower the drill right smack into some cave where a moon bear was hibernating. All the circuits must have busted down at the same time. We'll fix it tomorrow. Let's get the girls and have a night on the town."

IT WAS a very unsuccessful night on the town. Jim and Mary, and Sam and his wife went to a show and a nightclub.

"You're moving like a zombie. What's the matter?" said Mary as she and Jim danced together.

"Feel like a zombie. Why don't we give it up and go home? I

want to get down to the lab by five in the morning."

"That's the trouble. You've done nothing but live in the lab since the Prospector landed. So we're not going home. Sam and Alice are having a good time. You dance with Alice next, and make her think you're enjoying it!"

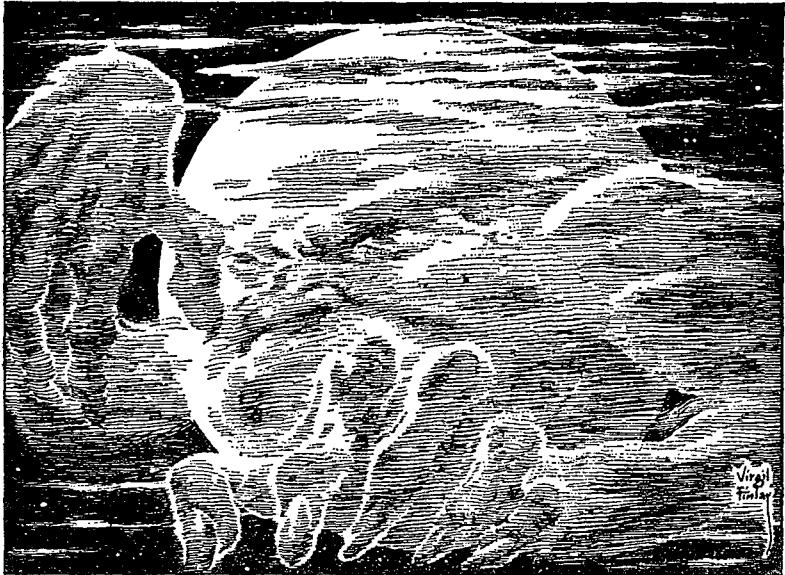
So Jim didn't go to bed at all, but he *was* at the lab by five in the morning. The night crew were still at work. He had steered them away from the analyses he was doing so they were unaware of the shattering results he had found.

He took over the controls, and resumed work alone.

There was no doubt about it. If any of the methods they were using were accurate, then he had discovered almost indisputable proof that some living tissue existed five hundred feet below the surface of the moon.

Since the laser drilling head sealed the walls of the hole with a coating of frozen lava, it was necessary to probe horizontally for samples. Small extension drills, capable of reaching five feet on either side of the hole, were carried in the head for this purpose.

Jim lowered the head through the last twenty feet of its drilling limit. Every six inches he sent the horizontal probes to their limits. The tell-tale chemicals ex-



isted at every point. He computed the volume he had probed, and felt numb.

By the time Sam had shown up, Jim had withdrawn the probe to the surface and was moving the Prospector slowly across the moon's surface.

Sam saw the motion on the television screen. "Where are you going? I thought we were going to check out the hole we were in."

"It's been checked," said Jim. He hesitated. His original plan had been to move the Prospector a distance of fifty feet and probe again to the five-hundred-foot level. Then, decisively, he pressed the control that kept the prospector moving. He stopped it a hun-

dred feet from the previous hole and began the long, tedious job of drilling again to the limits of the Prospector's equipment.

SAM spelled him off during the day. By evening, they had hit the four-hundred-and-fifty-foot level. Jim took his first analysis in this hole. The chemicals were there. In greater concentration than at the same level in the previous hole.

Jim turned to Sam. "We have circuits for measuring potential differences on the lunar landscape. Could we make a reading at the bottom of this hole?"

Sam considered. "It'll take some doing, but I think we can

manage it. What do you expect to find from that?"

Jim didn't dare tell him what was in his mind. "I don't know," he said. "But it might be worth trying—if there is anything living down there—"

By the following afternoon, Sam had made the necessary equipment arrangements so that potential readings could be obtained in the mass from which the chemical samples were being removed. The telemetered report was connected to a recorder that plotted the variations against a time scale.

As soon as the circuit was set up and calibrated, the recording meter showed a response. A very slow, rhythmic pulsation showed in the inked line on the paper.

Jim felt as if his breathing must have stopped for an infinite length of time. "That's what I thought we'd find," he said at last.

"What?" said Sam. "I don't understand what you're talking about. What do you think those pulsations mean?"

"Did you ever hear of an electroencephalograph?" said Jim, gravely.

"Electro—Sure, brain wave recordings. Jim! You don't think these waves—!"

In silence, the two men stared at the wavering pen and the sheet of recording paper that slowly unrolled beneath it.

DR. Thomas Banning had been a class mate of Jim Cochran when they were both in their first couple of years of college. Banning had gone on into medicine, specializing in brain studies, while Jim had turned to chemistry. The two had been out of touch for several years.

Tom Banning was the first one Jim thought of, not only because of their old friendship, but because he had read recent papers describing some of Tom's new work on the frontier of electroencephalography. He called first on the phone, then arranged for a personal visit. Sam went with him. They had closed down all Prospector work while they were to be away.

Tom met them and was introduced to Sam as he ushered them into his own modest laboratory. "This isn't the plush sort of surroundings you've become used to," he said as he showed them around. "The Government isn't spending billions these days trying to find out how the human mind works."

Jim could well understand Tom's bitterness. Doing research on the frontiers of the mind, he was forced to spend his own money for much of his laboratory equipment.

"I can sympathize, but that's about all," said Jim. "I just work here myself."

"Tell me about your problem. On the phone, that sounded interesting enough to make a man's day brighter. You said something about an unknown life form with electrical pulses that might be related to brain waves?"

Jim nodded. "That's the way it looks to me."

"But where does this life form exist? Surely it can be identified!"

"If I told you, you'd throw me out or call the paddy wagon. Look at these, first."

Jim and Sam spread out the long folds of chart they had accumulated through days of recording. "Does it look like anything to you?" asked Jim.

Tom Banning frowned. "Well, it certainly *could* be an EEG record of some kind. The apparatus—"

"The apparatus was nothing but a single electrical probe, and the signal was transmitted under very unsatisfactory conditions."

"Signal transmitted, you say? Just where did this come from, Jim? You didn't come all this way just to pull my leg."

"No," said Jim wearily. "If anybody's leg is being pulled, it's mine. I wanted to see if you could recognize it as having any similarity to an EGG. Then I wanted to ask about your work you reported in your last paper.

The one on EEG as a Brain Stimulus and Communication Medium."

"Yes? What did you want to know about that?"

"You've had some success in taking the EEG waves of one person and applying them to the brain of another person so that the latter understood some of the thoughts of the first person while being stimulated by his brain waves."

"Yes."

"Would it be possible to do that with this record?"

Tom studied the record silently. "Any cyclic electric impulse can be applied as a stimulus to the brain. Certainly, this one can. My question still remains, however, what kind of a creature generated these pulses? If it is so alien you can't even identify it, we can't really be sure that these are brain waves. I can only say they may be."

"That's good enough for me," said Jim. "How about setting it up so that we can see if these tell us anything."

"I think I ought to make you tell me where you got these, first."

"Afterwards, please, Tom."

IT TOOK the rest of the day to transcribe the record to the format required by Tom's light-intensity reader. They set the following day for the experiment.

Both Sam and Jim were to participate. Tom applied eight electrodes to the scale of each man. They reclined in deep sleep-back chairs, and Tom suggested they close their eyes.

Jim began to feel a sense of apprehension as he heard the first faint whine of the equipment. He knew the transcribed tape was unreeling slowly beneath the photo-electric scanner. The resulting fluctuating current was being amplified, filtered, gated to the proper level, and applied to the electrodes on his skull. He felt nothing.

"Just like a ride on the merry-go-round," he said in disappointment.

Then it struck.

Like a fearful, billowing blackness rising out of the depths of Hell itself, it washed over him. It sucked at his very soul, corroding, destroying a wind of darkness where the very concept of light was unknown.

He was not conscious of his screaming until he heard his own dying voice and grew slowly aware of the sudden rawness of his throat. He heard another screaming and it sounded like Sam. Dimly, he wondered what had happened to Sam.

Tom was bending over him, patting his face with a cold towel and murmuring, "Wake up, Jim! You're all right now. You're all right."

He opened his eyes and saw Tom, white-faced. He turned and looked at Sam, whose head lolled sluggishly while a low whimpering came from his lips.

"I'm all right," said Jim weakly. "Take care of Sam."

Exhausted, he leaned back and closed his eyes another moment. Sweat oozed from every pore of his skin, cold, fear-inspired sweat.

AN HOUR later, he felt completely recovered from the experience, except that his knees were still a little wobbly when he tried his legs.

"We've got to try it again," Jim said. "Can you cut down the intensity a little? Better still, how about rigging up an intensity control that we can operate for ourselves?"

"Nobody is trying that thing again in my lab," said Tom Banning. "Do you think I want a couple of corpses on my hands? Not to mention the droves of police that your screaming will bring down."

"We've got to *know*," Jim said. "Listen, Tom, I'll tell you where we got this record. Then you can judge for yourself."

Rapidly, he told Tom all that had happened since their first experience with the Prospector. The brain specialist listened impassively until the end of the story.

"So you conclude there's something monstrous on the moon, and this experience you've just had would indicate that it's highly inimical to human life," said Tom.

"That's about it," said Jim.

"What do you expect to do about it?"

"I want to finish what we started here. Then I've got to show the authorities that the moon project has got to stop. We can't go ahead with our moon landings now. If we do, that thing will be stirred out of dormancy into life—and, somehow, it will make its way to earth. I wouldn't be surprised if it could navigate space alone, its own naked being."

Tom turned back to his equipment. "All right, let's go. I want to get a sampling of that before we're through, too."

With a control that he could operate himself, Jim found it endurable. With the control at minimum intensity, he tensed for that first terrible impact of the alien impulses pouring into his own mind.

They were weaker, but still he felt as if the shroud of death had settled over him. He heard a moan from Sam and knew his companion was experiencing the same sensations.

The impulses of evil poured on through the electrodes into his mind. He sensed the immensity

and purpose of the thing that had generated them. He sensed that out of some far reach of space, where time and dimension were not the same, the thing had acquired an eternal nature of a kind that knew no birth and could experience no death in the dimensions of man.

He sensed that its nature and its purpose were pure destruction. Destruction of life in any form. It was a thing of death, and life and it could not exist in the same universe:

He sensed how it had come and why it had come, and the partial defeat that had sent it into dormancy because there was no life of the kind it knew in the universe through which it hurtled.

Now—it was once again aware of life.

THE three of them went back to the tracking station laboratory together. Jim managed to obtain a clearance for Tom to see what they were doing. "I want to move the Prospector a long distance and try one more hole," he told Sam.

"What do you mean by a long distance?"

"A hundred miles."

"A hun—! You think you'll still find this thing that far away?"

"We'll find out. Can the Prospector travel that far?"

"Sure. If you wait long enough."

Its maximum speed is two miles an hour."

"A little better than two days. Let's pick the direction of the flattest and lowest terrain. I don't want to get it up into the mountains."

During the following two days, Jim considered what his next move should be. He had to present his data and evidence to a conference of men who mattered, who could make the necessary decisions. It had to be brought to the attention of the top levels of NASA. The Department of Defense and the Presidential advisors should be in on it, too.

His thoughts came to a stop and he felt more than a little hysterical. Who was he? A third-string chemical researcher on one of dozens of current NASA projects. Who was going to let him call a conference of the nation's brass and instruct them to close down the moon program?

Nobody.

In the Civil Service hierarchy to which he belonged there was absolutely no way on earth by which he could bring his story to the attention of the people who could act on it.

No way at all. But he had to try.

He tried to reach the Director of NASA. The Director's secretary told Jim the Director was out of town and could not be reached except for emergency or

other top-priority communications. Jim said that was exactly the nature of his message. The Secretary told him to get his Project Director to approve the message and an effort could be made to get it through.

That meant Hennesey.

Hennesey laughed in his face, and told him that one more fantasy like that would get him fired.

Jim had known that's the way it would be, but he had to try.

By this time, the Prospector had traveled more than ninety miles from the last probe. It was far enough, Jim decided. They'd put down one more probe, then—he didn't know where he'd go from there.

Sam saw the bleakness and bitterness on his face when he came into the tracking station. "No luck?" said Sam.

"What do you think? Have you ever realized that there is no way whatever for the ordinary citizen to get through with a message that requires action at the top? Channels, supervisors' approvals, okays by supervisors' supervisors—the only communication the top level has is with itself; generals talk to other generals, Bureau Directors talk to generals and other Bureau Directors, the President talks to his advisors who talk only to each other. The communication barrier is complete and absolute."

"I could have told you that," said Sam. "I've been here longer than you have. But some of them may still read a newspaper now and then."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Call a news conference of the science editors and reporters of the major press services and big-city newspapers. Your reputation is big enough that they'll listen to you."

"You saw what they did to me last time!"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe you know a better way."

JIM took his seat at the console and watched the slow progress of the Prospector across the moon's surface. It was winding its way through an area of small, low crags. Ahead was a smooth, level plain. Jim determined to halt there and make the next probe.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hennesey moving toward them. He could think of nothing that would make the day more unpleasant than Hennesey's presence.

The Project Director scanned the panels and the meters that showed the distance traveled by the Prospector.

"Why have you moved the machine so far?" Hennesey demanded. "You've used up valuable machine time that could have been used in additional probes.

We may be approaching the end of the useful life of the Prospector very rapidly."

"I am aware of that," said Jim icily. "The stock of reagents aboard is nearly exhausted. I wanted to make at least one comparison probe at a considerable distance from our original site." Hennesey grunted and remained silent, watching. Then, suddenly he cried out, "Look out! You fool—!"

Jim had seen it, too. At the edge of the crags was a ten-foot wide fissure spreading darkly on either side of the Prospector. The drives of the machine were upon it before he realized it was there. In fact, the crazy thought echoed in the back of his mind that it *wasn't* there an instant before.

He slammed his hand against the switches that sent out a reversing signal to the drives of the Prospector. But it was too late. The worm drives bit into nothingness as the machine toppled slowly at the edge of the crevasse. And in that moment, as the image on the television screen teetered crazily, Jim had the impression that he was looking into the black depths of utter horror. There was a blackness oozing and writhing faintly in the depths—that could have been thirty or a hundred feet deep. But he had seen just such a black horror once before.

When the EEG signals from the moon first smashed into his brain!

He glanced at Sam. Sam was staring in a kind of intense horror that told Jim he recognized it, too.

The image tilted abruptly against the black moon sky. Then the screen went dark. And Jim had the feeling that the blackness had closed over him.

But Hennesey had sensed nothing of this. He was cursing and raging beside Jim. "You blind, brainless fool! You wiped out a billion-dollar experiment because you weren't looking! You're through, Cochran! Get everything that's yours and be out of here in ten minutes!"

Hennesey whirled and strode away, his rage reeking through the atmosphere of the room.

Jim stood up and moved to the back of the panel. He opened the plastic doors and clipped the last ten feet from the spool of TV recording tape and slipped it in his pocket. When he returned to the other side of the console, Sam was waiting for him.

"Where are you going?" said Jim.

"With you."

"Where's that?"

"I don't think you know, but I do. I'll tag along and see if I'm right."

"You're crazy. Didn't you just hear Hennesey fire me?"

"Yeah. I quit at the same time."

"You're really crazy."

Jim had a few textbooks and scientific papers in his desk. He arranged for one of his men to clean them out. He didn't feel that he could endure remaining in the station any longer.

Tom Banning followed them out into the sunshine of the parking lot. "I'm sorry," he said, "but it looked as if what happened back there was rather inevitable."

"It was," said Jim. "I'd have kicked his teeth in sooner or later. It's better this way."

"What will you do now?"

"Ask Sam. He seems to think he has some crazy idea of what I'm going to do next. I sure don't."

"The news conference," said Sam. "You'd better call it right away before news of your dismissal gets out. They may think you just want to unload some sour grapes if they hear of that first."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Will you back me up in the conference, Tom?"

The doctor nodded. "Gladly. It's pretty hard to believe, but you've got me believing."

JIM was personally acquainted with most of the newsmen who showed up for his conference. He had met them and helped

them get stories on the Prospector during the past two years. They were sympathetic toward him.

He began his story by reviewing his initial discovery of the difference in moon elements. He explained the analysis and showed them samples of the telemetry record. Then he eased slowly into his discovery of fossil hydrocarbons and finally the living hydrocarbons. He watched carefully as he moved deeper into the story. He didn't want to lose them here.

They stayed with him, incredulous but confident that he knew what he was talking about. It was when he spoke of the fluctuating potential measurements, that proved to be interpretable as EEG recordings that he almost lost them. But he introduced Tom Banning quickly to verify his statements. And Tom introduced the EEG machine itself. He offered to demonstrate. A half dozen of the reporters tried it. *They* had no doubts, afterward.

"You can almost draw your own conclusions," said Jim in winding up the conference. "That thing is out there in our sky. There's no doubt about it. I've shown you what we know. Now let me tell you what I believe:

"There is some form of life in the moon. It is not merely *in* the moon. It *is* the moon. I believe its

bulk occupies almost the entire volume of the moon. I believe this nemesis was spawned incalculable eons ago in a time and a space that is literally outside our own. It was driven out of that time and space by intelligent beings who could not destroy it, but who could at least exile it in a state of dormancy. Or perhaps they thought they had destroyed it and wanted not even the remains in their own domain. Perhaps the craters of the moon were caused by bombardment intended to destroy the thing.

"But it is not dead. It *was* dormant. Now, our laser probings have stirred it to feeble life. It made a deliberate effort to capture or destroy the Prospector by opening a fissure beneath it. My TV film recording proves that the fissure was not there previously.

"What are we to do about it? That is why I have called you here. Consider that the science of the intelligences in the domain that spawned this thing could not destroy it. What chance has our feeble science and powers against such a force? Hydrogen bombs would probably serve only to feed it the energy for which it is starved.

"We must cease our lunar exploration program at once. We can hope that it is not too late. If it is not, this thing may relapse into the dormancy from

which it has been shaken. We can only hope.

"But if we persist in our explorations and our probings of the moon we are certain to loose upon ourselves a living force that our entire world of science will be helpless to overcome.

"We must stop the moon program now!"

THEY kept him for another two hours with questions and demands for further information. He gave them everything he knew, and when they finally left, he felt that a sane and correct story of his findings would be published. He waited for whatever results would be published by the news services the following morning.

He waited.

There was nothing.

Eddie Fry called him two days later. Eddie was the reporter who knew him best. "They killed the story," said Eddie. "We had to clear it with government sources, and they persuaded every press association and newspaper that knew about it to kill it. They said it would destroy the national economy that was being built up on the space program. We tried to make them believe it, Jim, but we couldn't do it. It was hard enough to be convinced when we were listening to you. Second hand, it just wouldn't go over. You really can't blame them.

"They're doing something else, too. They're really going to nail you for this thing. A story is being released about your dismissal. It is said that you were released for fantastic and unreliable theories and for incompetence that resulted in the loss of the Prospector. I'm sorry as hell, Jim. I wish we could kill that one, but there's not a thing we can do for you."

"It's o.k., Eddie," said Jim. "I know how it is."

Crackpot. He was finished.

He called Allan at his base that night. His brother-in-law's voice was icy as he answered. "What do you want, Jim?"

"Come down over the weekend, can you, Allan? I've got something important I want to talk to you about."

"Listen, Jim. Stay away from me! Don't call; don't try to see me. Don't send me letters or telegrams. Nothing! Do you understand that?"

"What the devil—?"

"They're investigating me. Because of you. They want to know how much I've been listening to your crackpot notions. They're afraid maybe it will produce an instability that will make me unfit for the moon trip. If I lose out, it will be because of you!"

"That's what I want to talk to you about. Allan, you've got to listen to me! You won't get off the moon alive—"

The phone went dead. Jim hung up slowly and went back to the living room where Mary sat in tense, white fear. She had heard Jim's side of the conversation. She guessed what Allan had said.

"It's no use," said Jim. "Don't try to reach him. He'll hate you forever."

IT WAS no use to run, but they ran anyway. This was what Sam meant when he said he knew what Jim was going to do. Jim Cochran was completely blackballed in his own profession. As he said, he couldn't have gotten a job stirring with a wooden paddle in a soap factory.

Tom Banning and his family went with them. They went as far north as they could and finally stopped running on the edge of the Canadian wilderness. They pooled their funds and bought some wheat land and some cattle stock and tried to stop thinking beyond the end of each day.

They were grateful for the absence of television, but they kept a radio. Through it, they learned when the Apollo finally took off with its three-man crew. They followed its two and a half day journey through space and heard the voice of Captain Allan Wright announce they were in lunar orbit.

A few hours later the landing capsule was disengaged from the

spaceship and Captain Wright and William Chambers rode it down. Their voices were heard in exultation as they announced their first steps on the surface of the moon.

It was night in northern Canada when the landing was made. Jim and Sam and Tom and their families were outside watching the full moon, trying to imagine how it was up there. From the house they heard the radio relaying the voices of the astronauts. The voices were relayed to earth through the more powerful transmitter of the orbiting Apollo, but as the spaceship circled the moon the voices of the men on the surface were lost. Then they returned once more as the ship came over their horizon.

For five orbits their voices came and went as they described their sensations and exulted in the first minutes of their achievement. Then, on the sixth orbit, there were no voices. There was only the sudden, shrill cry of the third crewman, Don Anderson, who manned the orbiting ship.

"Allan! Bill! Apollo to capsule: Come in, please. Bill—where are you—I can't even see your capsule. I'm passing right over the spot. Apollo to Base: I can't locate the capsule through the telescope. It looks like a big crevasse right where the capsule was, but it wasn't there before. Allan—Bill—Come in! Come in!"

(Continued on page 65)

STAY OFF THE MOON!

The people of Mars were perverse. They did not want Earth's proffered gift of rich land, much water, new power. They fought Rehabilitation. And with them fought Carey, the Earthman, who wanted only the secret that lay at the end of . . .

THE ROAD TO SINHARAT

By LEIGH BRACKETT

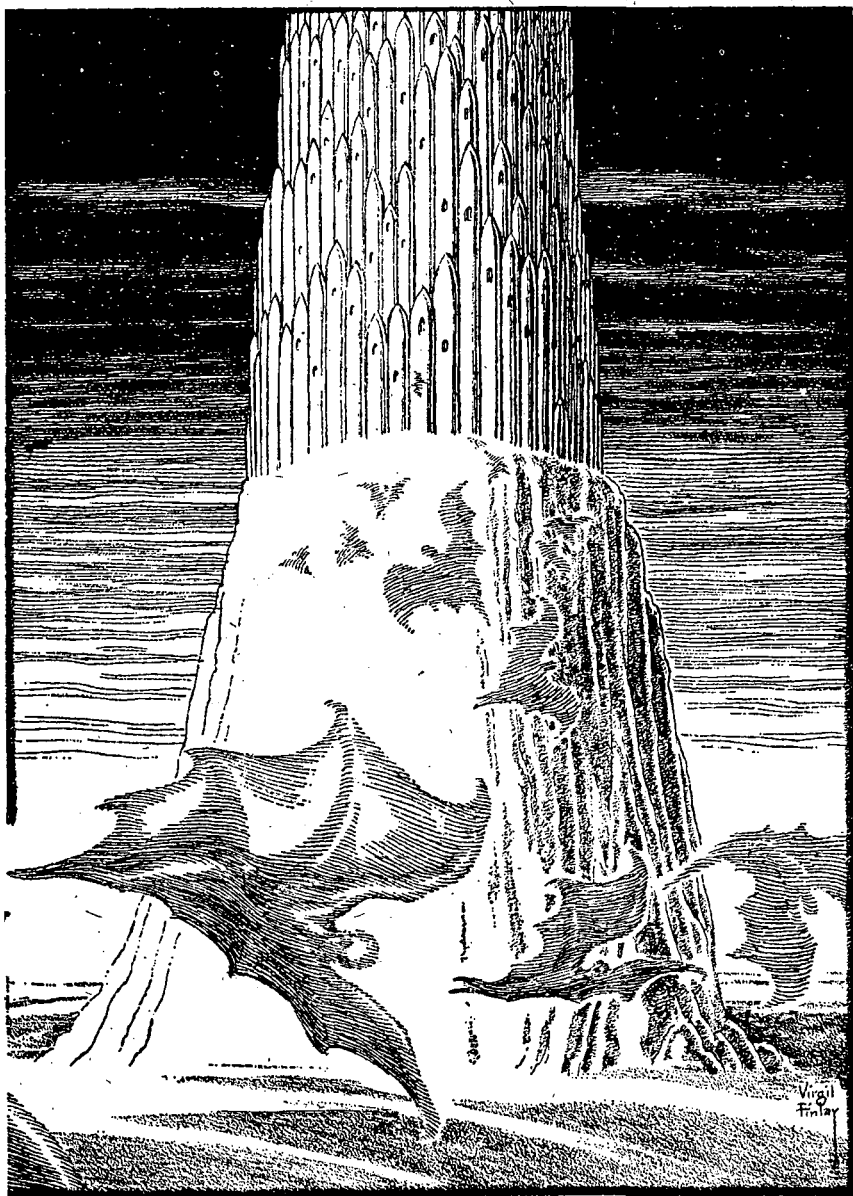
Illustrated by FINLAY

THE door was low, deep-sunk into the thickness of the wall. Carey knocked and then he waited, stooped a bit under the lintel-stone, fitting his body to the meagre shadow as though he could really hide it there. A few yards away, beyond cracked and tilted paving-blocks, the Jekkara Low-Canal showed its still black

water to the still black sky, and both were full of stars.

Nothing moved along the canal-site. The town was closed tight, and this in itself was so unnatural that it made Carey shiver. He had been here before and he knew how it ought to be. The chief industry of the Low-Canal towns is sinning of one





Virgil
Finlay

sort of another, and they work at it right around the clock. One might have thought that all the people had gone away, but Carey knew they hadn't. He knew that he had not taken a single step unwatched. He had not really believed that they would let him come this far, and he wondered why they had not killed him. Perhaps they remembered him.

There was a sound on the other side of the door.

Carey said in the antique High Martian, "Here is one who claims the guest-right." In Low Martian, the vernacular that fitted more easily on his tongue, he said, "Let me in, Derech. You owe me blood."

The door opened narrowly and Carey slid through it, into lamp-light and relative warmth. Derech closed the door and barred it, saying,

"Damn you, Carey. I knew you were going to turn up here babbling about blood-debts. I swore I wouldn't let you in."

He was a Low-Canaller, lean and small and dark and predatory. He wore a red jewel in his left ear-lobe and a totally incongruous but comfortable suit of Terran synthetics, insulated against heat and cold. Carey smiled.

"Sixteen years ago," he said, "you'd have perished before you'd have worn that."

"Corruption. Nothing corrupts

like comfort, unless it's kindness." Derech sighed. "I knew it was a mistake to let you save my neck that time. Sooner or later you'd claim payment. Well, now that I have let you in, you might as well sit down." He poured wine into a cup of alabaster worn thin as an eggshell and handed it to Carey. They drank, sombrely, in silence. The flickering lamp-light showed the shadows and the deep lines in Carey's face.

Derech said, "How long since you've slept?"

"I can sleep on the way," said Carey, and Derech looked at him with amber eyes as coldly speculative as a cat's.

CAREY did not press him. The room was large, richly furnished with the bare, spare, faded richness of a world that had very little left to give in the way of luxury. Some of the things were fairly new, made in the traditional manner by Martian craftsmen. They were almost indistinguishable from the things that had been old when the Reed Kings and the Bee Kings were little boys along the Nile-bank.

"What will happen," Derech asked, "if they catch you?"

"Oh," said Carey, "they'll deport me first. Then the United Worlds Court will try me, and they can't do anything but find me guilty. They'll hand me over

to Earth for punishment, and there will be further investigations and penalties and fines and I'll be a thoroughly broken man when they've finished, and sorry enough for it. Though I think they'll be sorrier in the long run."

"That won't help matters any," said Derech.

"No."

"Why," asked Derech, "why is it that they will not listen?"

"Because they know that they are right."

Derech said an evil word.

"But they do. I've sabotaged the Rehabilitation Project as much as I possibly could. I've rechanneled funds and misdirected orders so they're almost two years behind schedule. These are the things they'll try me for. But my real crime is that I have questioned Goodness and the works thereof. Murder they might forgive me, but not that."

He added wearily, "You'll have to decide quickly. The UW boys are working closely with the Council of City-States, and Jekkara is no longer untouchable. It's also the first place they'll look for me."

"I wondered if that had occurred to you," Derech frowned. "That doesn't bother me. What does bother me is that I know where you want to go. We tried it once, remember? We ran for our lives across that damned

desert. Four solid days and nights." He shivered.

"Send me as far as Barrakesh. I can disappear there, join a southbound caravan. I intend to go alone."

"If you intend to kill yourself, why not do it here in comfort and among friends? Let me think," Derech said. "Let me count my years and my treasure and weigh them against a probable yard of sand."

Flames hissed softly around the coals in the brazier. Outside, the wind got up and started its ancient work, rubbing the house walls with tiny grains of dust, rounding off the corners, hollowing the window places. All over Mars the wind did this, to huts and palaces, to mountains and the small burrow-heaps of animals, laboring patiently toward a city when the whole face of the planet should be one smooth level sea of dust. Only lately new structures of metal and plastic had appeared beside some of the old stone cities. They resisted the wearing sand. They seemed prepared to stay forever. And Carey fancied that he could hear the old wind laughing as it went.

THERE was a scratching against the closed shutter in the back wall, followed by a rapid drumming of fingertips. Derech rose, his face suddenly alert. He rapped twice on the shutter to

say that he understood and then turned to Carey. "Finish your wine."

He took the cup and went into another room with it. Carey stood up. Mingling with the sound of the wind outside, the gentle throb of motors became audible, low in the sky and very near.

Derech returned and gave Carey a shove toward an inner wall. Carey remembered the pivoted stone that was there, and the space behind it. He crawled through the opening. "Don't sneeze or thrash about," said Derech. "The stonework is loose, and they'd hear you."

He swung the stone shut. Carey huddled as comfortably as possible in the uneven hole, worn smooth with the hiding of illegal things for countless generations. Air and a few faint gleams of light seeped through between the stone blocks, which were set without mortar as in most Martian construction. He could even see a thin vertical segment of the room.

When the sharp knock came at the door, he discovered that he could hear quite clearly.

Derech moved across his field of vision. The door opened. A man's voice demanded entrance in the name of the United Worlds and the Council of Martian City-States.

"Please enter," said Derech.

Carey saw, more or less fragmentarily, four men. Three were Martians in the undistinguished cosmopolitan garb of the City-States. They were the equivalent of the FBI. The fourth was an Earthman, and Carey smiled to see the measure of his own importance. The spare, blond, good-looking man with the sunburn and the friendly blue eyes might have been an actor, a tennis-player, or a junior executive on holiday. He was Howard Wales, Earth's best man in Interpol.

Wales let the Martians do the talking, and while they did it he drifted unobtrusively about, peering through doorways, listening, touching, *feeling*. Carey became fascinated by him, in an unpleasant sort of way. Once he came and stood directly in front of Carey's crevice in the wall. Carey was afraid to breathe, and he had a dreadful notion that Wales would suddenly turn about and look straight in at him through the crack.

The senior Martian, a middle-aged man with an able look about him, was giving Derech a briefing on the penalties that awaited him if he harbored a fugitive or withheld information. Carey thought that he was being too heavy about it. Even five years ago he would not have dared to show his face in Jekkara. He could picture Derech listening amiably, lounging

against something and playing with the jewel in his ear. Finally Derech got bored with it and said without heat,

"Because of our geographical position, we have been exposed to the New Culture." The capitals were his. "We have made adjustments to it. But this is still Jekkara and you're here on suffering, no more. Please don't forget it."

Wales spoke, deftly forestalling any comment from the City-Stater. "You've been Carey's friend for many years, haven't you?"

"We robbed tombs together in the old days."

"'Archeological research' is a nicer term, I should think."

"My very ancient and perfectly honorable guild never used it. But I'm an honest trader now, and Carey doesn't come here."

He might have added a qualifying "often," but he did not.

The City-Stater said derisively, "He has or will come here now."

"Why?" asked Derech.

"He needs help. Where else could he go for it?"

"Anywhere. He has many friends. And he knows Mars better than most Martians, probably a damn sight better than you do."

"But," said Wales quietly, "outside of the City-States all Earthmen are being hunted

down like rabbits; if they're foolish enough to stay. For Carey's sake, if you know where he is, tell us. Otherwise he is almost certain to die."

"He's a grown man," Derech said. "He must carry his own load."

HE'S carrying too much . . ." Wales said, and then broke off. There was a sudden gabble of talk, both in the room and outside. Everybody moved toward the door, out of Cary's vision, except Derech who moved into it, relaxed and languid and infuriatingly self-assured. Carey could not hear the sound that had drawn the others but he judged that another flier was landing. In a few minutes Wales and the others came back, and now there were some new people with them. Carey squirmed and craned, getting closer to the crack, and he saw Alan Woodthorpe, his superior, Administrator of the Rehabilitation Project for Mars, and probably the most influential man on the planet. Carey knew that he must have rushed across a thousand miles of desert from his headquarters at Kahora, just to be here at this moment.

Carey was flattered and deeply moved.

Woodthorpe introduced himself to Derech. He was disarmingly simple and friendly in his approach, a man driven and

wearied by many vital matters but never forgetting to be warm, gracious, and human. And the devil of it was that he was exactly what he appeared to be. That was what made dealing with him so impossibly difficult.

Derech said, smiling a little, "Don't stray away from your guards."

"Why is it?" Woodthorpe asked. "Why this hostility? If only your people would understand that we're trying to help them."

"They understand that perfectly," Derech said. "What they can't understand is why, when they have thanked you politely and explained that they neither need nor want your help, you still refuse to leave them alone."

"Because we know what we can do for them! They're destitute now. We can make them rich, in water, in arable land, in power—we can change their whole way of life. Primitive people are notoriously resistant to change, but in time they'll realize . . ."

"Primitive?" said Derech.

"Oh, not the Low-Canallers," said Woodthorpe quickly. "Your civilization was flourishing, I know, when Proconsul was still wondering whether or not to climb down out of his tree. For that very reason I cannot understand why you side with the Drylanders."

Derech said, "Mars is an old, cranky, dried-up world, but we understand her. We've made a bargain with her. We don't ask too much of her, and she gives us sufficient for our needs. We can depend on her. We do not want to be made dependent on other men."

"But this is a new age," said Woodthorpe. "Advanced technology makes anything possible. The old prejudices, the parochial viewpoints, are no longer . . ."

"You were saying something about primitives."

"I was thinking of the Dryland tribes. We had counted on Dr. Carey, because of his unique knowledge, to help them understand us. Instead, he seems bent on stirring them up to war. Our survey parties have been set upon with the most shocking violence. If Carey succeeds in reaching the Drylands there's no telling what he may do. Surely you don't want . . ."

"Primitive," Derech said, with a ring of cruel impatience in his voice. "Parochial. The gods send me a wicked man before a well-meaning fool. Mr. Woodthorpe, the Drylanders do not need Dr. Carey to stir them up to war. Neither do we. We do not want our wells and our water-courses rearranged. We do not want to be resettled. We do not want our population expanded. We do not want the resources that will last

us for thousands of years yet, if they're not tampered with, pumped out and used up in a few centuries. We are in balance with our environment, we want to stay that way. And we will fight, Mr. Woodthorpe. You're not dealing with theories now. You're dealing with our lives. We are not going to place them in your hands."

He turned to Wales and the Martians. "Search the house. If you want to search the town, that's up to you. But I wouldn't be too long about any of it."

LOOKING pained and hurt, Woodthorpe stood for a moment and then went out, shaking his head. The Martians began to go through the house. Carey heard Derech's voice say, "Why don't you join them, Mr. Wales?"

Wales answered pleasantly, "I don't like wasting my time." He bade Derech good night and left, and Carey was thankful.

After a while the Martians left too. Derech bolted the door and sat down again to drink his interrupted glass of wine. He made no move to let Carey out, and Carey conquered a very strong desire to yell at him. He was getting just a touch claustrophobic now. Derech sipped his wine slowly, emptied the cup and filled it again. When it was half empty for the second time a girl came in from the back.

She wore the traditional dress of the Low-Canals, which Carey was glad to see because some of the women were changing it for the cosmopolitan and featureless styles that made all women look alike, and he thought the old style was charming. Her skirt was a length of heavy orange silk caught at the waist with a broad girdle. Above that she wore nothing but a necklace and her body was slim and graceful as a bending reed. Twisted around her ankles and braided in her dark hair were strings of tiny bells, so that she chimed as she walked with a faint elfin music, very sweet and wicked.

"They're all gone now," she told Derech, and Derech rose and came quickly toward Carey's hiding place.

"Someone was watching through the chinks in the shutters," he said as he helped Carey out. "Hoping I'd betray myself when I thought they were gone." He asked the girl, "It wasn't the Earthman, was it?"

"No." She had poured herself some wine and curled up with it in the silks and warm furs that covered the guest-bench on the west wall. Carey saw that her eyes were green as emerald, slightly tilted, bright, curious and without mercy. He became suddenly very conscious of his unshaven chin and the gray that was beginning to be noticeable at

his temples, and his general soiled and weary condition.

"I don't like that man Wales," Derech was saying. "He's almost as good as I am. We'll have him to reckon with yet."

"We," said Carey. "You've weighed your yard of sand?"

Derech shrugged ruefully. "You must have heard me talking myself into it. Well, I've been getting a little bored with the peaceful life." He smiled, the smile Carey remembered from the times they had gone robbing tombs together in places where murder would have been a safer occupation. "And it's always irked me that we were stopped that time. I'd like to try again. By the way, this is Arrin. She'll be going with us as far as Barrakesh."

"Oh," Carey bowed, and she smiled at him from her nest in the soft furs. Then she looked at Derech. "What is there beyond Barrakesh?"

"Kesh," said Derech. "And Shun."

"But you don't trade in the Drylands," she said impatiently. "And if you did, why should I be left behind?"

"We're going to Sinharat," Derech said. "The Ever-living."

"Sinharat?" Arrin whispered. There was a long silence, and then she turned her gaze on Carey. "If I had known that, I would have told them where you were.

I would have let them take you." She shivered and bent her head.

"That would have been foolish," Derech said, fondling her. "You'd have thrown away your chance to be the lady of one of the two saviors of Mars."

"If you live," she said.

"But my dear child," said Derech, "can you, sitting there, guarantee to me that you will be alive tomorrow?"

"You will have to admit," said Carey slowly, "that her odds are somewhat better than ours."

II

THE barge was long and narrow, buoyed on pontoon-like floats so that it rode high even with a full cargo. pontoons, hull, and deck were metal. There had not been any trees for ship-building for a very long time. In the center of the deck was a low cabin where several people might sleep, and forward toward the blunt bow was a fire-pit where the cooking was done. The motive power was animal, four of the scaly-sided, bad-tempered, hissing beasts of Martian burden plodding along the canal bank with a tow-cable.

The pace was slow. Carey had wanted to go across country direct to Barrakesh, but Derech had forbidden it.

"I can't take a caravan. All my business goes by the canal,

and everyone knows it. So you and I would have to go alone, riding by night and hiding by day, and saving no time at all." He jabbed his thumb at the sky. "Wales will come when you least expect him and least want him. On the barge you'll have a place to hide, and I'll have enough men to discourage him if he should be rash enough to interfere with a trader going about his normal and lawful business."

"He wouldn't be above it," Carey said gloomily.

"But only when he's desperate. That will be later."

So the barge went gliding gently on its way southward along the thread of dark water that was the last open artery of what had once been an ocean. It ran snow-water now, melt from the polar cap. There were villages beside the canal, and areas of cultivation where long fields showed a startling green against the reddish-yellow desolation. Again there were places where the sand had moved like an army, overwhelming the fields and occupying the houses, so that only mounded heaps would show where a village had been. There were bridges, some of them sound and serving the living, others springing out of nowhere and standing like broken rainbows against the sky. By day there was the stinging sunlight that hid nothing, and by night the

two moons laid a shifting loveliness on the land. And if Carey had not been goaded by a terrible impatience he would have been happy.

But all this, if Woodthorpe and the Rehabilitation Project had their way, would go. The waters of the canals would be impounded behind great dams far to the north, and the sparse populations would be moved and settled on new land. Deep-pumping operations, tapping the underground sources that fed the wells, would make up the winter deficit when the cap was frozen. The desert would be transformed, for a space anyway, into a flowering garden. Who would not prefer it to this bitter marginal existence? Who could deny that this was Bad and the Rehabilitation Project Good? No one but the people and Dr. Matthew Carey. And no one would listen to them.

At Sinharat lay the only possible hope of making them listen.

THE sky remained empty. Artrin spent most of her time on deck, sitting among the heaped-up bales. Carey knew that she watched him a great deal but he was not flattered. He thought that she hated him because he was putting Derech in danger of his life. He wished that Derech had left her behind.

On the fourth day at dawn the

wind dropped to a flat calm. The sun burned hot, setting sand and rock to shimmering. The water of the canal showed a surface like polished glass, and in the east the sharp line of the horizon thickened and blurred and was lost in a yellow haze. Derech stood sniffing like a hound at the still air, and around noon he gave the order to tie up. The crew, ten of them, ceased to lounge on the bales and got to work, driving steel anchor pins for the cables, rigging a shelter for the beasts, checking the lashings of the deck cargo. Carey and Derech worked beside them, and when he looked up briefly from his labors Carey saw Arrin crouched over the fire-pit in the midst of a great smoke, cooking furiously. The eastern sky became a wall, a wave curling toward the zenith, sooty ochre below, a blazing brass-color at its crest. It rushed across the land, roared, and broke upon them.

They helped each other to the cabin and crouched knee to knee in the tight space, the twelve men and Arrin, while the barge kicked and rolled, sank down deep and shot upward, struggling like a live thing under the blows of the wind. Dust and sand sifted through every vent-hole, tainting the air with a bitter taste. There was a sulphurous darkness, and the ear was deafened. Carey had been through

sand-storms before, and he wished that he was out in the open where he was used to it, and where he did not have to worry about the barge turning turtle and drowning him idiotically on the driest world in the System. And while all this was going on, Arrin was grimly guarding her pot.

The wind stopped its wild gusting and settled to a steady gale. When it appeared that the barge was going to remain upright after all, the men ate from Arrin's pot and were glad of the food. After that most of them went down into the hold to sleep because there was more room there. Arrin put the lid back on the pot and weighted it to keep the sand out, and then she said quietly to Derech,

"Why is it that you have to go—where you're going?"

"Because Dr. Carey believes that there are records there that may convince the Rehabilitation people that our "primitives" know what they are talking about."

Carey could not see her face clearly in the gloom, but he thought she was frowning, thinking hard.

"You believe," she said to Carey. "Do you know?"

"I know that there were records, once. They're referred to in other records. Whether they still exist or not is another matter.

But because of the peculiar nature of the place, and of the people who made them, I think it is possible."

He could feel her shiver. "But the Ramas were so long ago."

SHE barely whispered the name. It meant Immortal, and it had been a word of terror for so long that no amount of time could erase the memory. The Ramas had achieved their immortality by a system of induction that might have been likened to the pouring of old wine into new bottles, and though the principle behind the transplanting of a consciousness from one host to another was purely scientific, the reactions of the people from among whom they requisitioned their supply of hosts was one of simple emotional horror. The Ramas were regarded as vampires. Their ancient island city of Sinharat lay far and forgotten now in the remotest desolation of Shun, and the Drylanders held it holy, and forbidden. They had broken their own tabu just once, when Kynon of Shun raised his banner, claiming to have rediscovered the lost secret of the Ramas and promising the tribesmen and the Low-Canallers both eternal life and all the plunder they could carry. He had given them only death and since then the tabu was more fanatically enforced than ever.

"Their city has not been looted," Carey said. "That is why I have hope."

"But," said Arrin, "they weren't human. They were only evil."

"On the contrary. They were completely human. And at one time they made a very great effort to atone."

She turned again to Derech. "The Shunni will kill you."

"That is perfectly possible."

"But you must go." She added shrewdly, "If only to see whether you can."

Derech laughed. "Yes."

"Then I'll go with you. I'd rather see what happens to you than wait and wait and never know." As though that settled it, she curled up in her bunk and went to sleep.

Carey slept too, uneasily, dreaming shadowed dreams of Sinharat and waking from them in the dusty claustrophobic dark to feel hopelessly that he would never see it.

By mid-morning the storm had blown itself out, but now there was a sandbar forty feet long blocking the channel. The beasts were hitched to scoops brought up from the hold and put to dredging, and every man aboard stripped and went in with a shovel.

Carey dug in the wet sand, his taller stature and lighter skin perfectly separating him from

the smaller, darker Low-Canalers. He felt obvious and naked, and he kept a wary eye cocked toward the heavens. Once he got among the Drylanders, Wales would have to look very hard indeed to spot him. At Valkis, where there was some trade with the desert men, Derech would be able to get him the proper clothing and Carey would arrive at the Gateway, Barrakesh, already in the guise of a wandering tribesman. Until then he would have to be careful, both of Wales and the local canal-dwellers, who had very little to choose between Earthmen and the Drylanders who occasionally raided this far north, stripping their fields and stealing their women.

In spite of Carey's watchfulness, it was Derech who gave the alarm. About the middle of the afternoon he suddenly shouted Carey's name. Carey, laboring now in a haze of sweat and weariness, looked up and saw Derech pointing at the sky. Carey dropped his shovel and dived for the water.

THE barge was close by, but the flier came so fast that by the time he had reached the ladder he knew he could not possibly climb aboard without being seen. Arrin's voice said calmly from overhead,

"Dive under. There's room."

Carey caught a breath and

dived. The water was cold, and the sunlight slanting through it showed it thick and roiled from the storm. The shadow of the barge made a total darkness into which Carey plunged. When he thought he was clear of the broad pontoons he surfaced, hoping Arrin had told the truth. She had. There was space to breathe, and between the pontoons he could watch the flier come in low and hover on its rotors above the canal, watching. Then it landed. There were several men in it, but only Howard Wales got out.

Derech went to talk to him. The rest of the men kept on working, and Carey saw that the extra shovel had vanished into the water. Wales kept looking at the barge. Derech was playing with him, and Carey cursed. The icy chill of the water was biting him to the bone. Finally, to Wales' evident surprise, Derech invited him aboard. Carey swam carefully back and forth in the dark space under the hull, trying to keep his blood moving. After a long long time, a year or two, he saw Wales walking back to the flier. It seemed another year before the flier took off. Carey fought his way out from under the barge and into the sunlight again, but he was too stiff and numb to climb the ladder. Arrin and Derech had to pull him up.

"Anyone else," said Derech, "would be convinced. But this one—he gives his opponent credit for all the brains and deceitfulness he needs."

He poured liquor between Carey's chattering teeth and wrapped him in thick blankets and put him in a bunk. Then he said, "Could Wales have any way of guessing where we're going?"

Carey frowned. "I suppose he could, if he bothered to go through all my monographs and papers."

"I'm sure he's bothered."

"It's all there," Carey said dismissively. "How we tried it once and failed—and what I hoped to find, though the Rehabilitation Act hadn't come along then, and it was pure archaeological interest. And I have, I know, mentioned the Ramas to Woodthorpe when I was arguing with him about the advisability of all these earth-shattering—mars-shattering—changes. Why? Did Wales say something?"

"He said, 'Barrakesh will tell the story.'"

"He did, did he?" said Carey viciously. "Give me the bottle." He took a long pull and the liquor went into him like fire into glacial ice. "I wish to heaven I'd been able to steal a flier."

Derech shook his head. "You're lucky you didn't. They'd have had you out of the sky in an hour."

"Of course you're right. It's just that I'm in a hurry." He drank again and then he smiled, a very unscholarly smile. "If the gods are good to me, someday I'll have Mr. Wales between my hands."

THE local men came along that evening, about a hundred of them with teams and implements. They had already worked all day clearing other blocks, but they worked without question all that night and into the next day, each man choosing his own time to fall out and sleep when he could no longer stand up. The canal was their life, and their law said that the canal came first, before wife, child, brother, parent, or self, and it was a hanging matter. Carey stayed out of sight in the cabin, feeling guilty about not helping but not too guilty. It was backbreaking work. They had the channel clear by the middle of the morning, and the barge moved on southward.

Three days later a line of cliffs appeared in the east, far away at first but closing gradually until they marched beside the canal. They were high and steep, colored softly in shades of red and gold. The faces of the rock were fantastically eroded by a million years of water and ten millennia of wind. These were the rim of the sea-basin, and pres-

ently Carey saw in the distance ahead a shimmering line of mist on the desert where another canal cut through it. They were approaching Valkis.

It was sunset when they reached it. The low light struck in level shafts against the cliffs. Where the angle was right, it shone through the empty doors and window holes of the five cities that sprawled downward over the ledges of red-gold rock. It seemed as though hearthfires burned there, and warm lamp-light to welcome home men weary from the sea. But in the streets and squares and on the long flights of rock-cut steps only slow shadows moved with the sinking sun. The ancient quays stood stark as tombstones, marking the levels where new harbors had been built and then abandoned as the water left them, and the high towers that had flown the banners of the Sea-Kings were bare and broken.

Only the lowest city lived, and only a part of that, but it lived fiercely, defiant of the cold centuries towering over it. From the barge deck Carey watched the torches flare out like yellow stars in the twilight, and he heard voices, and the wild and lovely music of the double-banked harps. The dry wind had a smell in it of dusty spices and strange exotic things. The New Culture had not penetrated here, and

Carey was glad, though he did think that Valkis could stand being cleaned up just a little without hurting it any. They had two or three vices for sale there that were quite unbelievable.

"Stay out of sight," Derech told him, "till I get back."

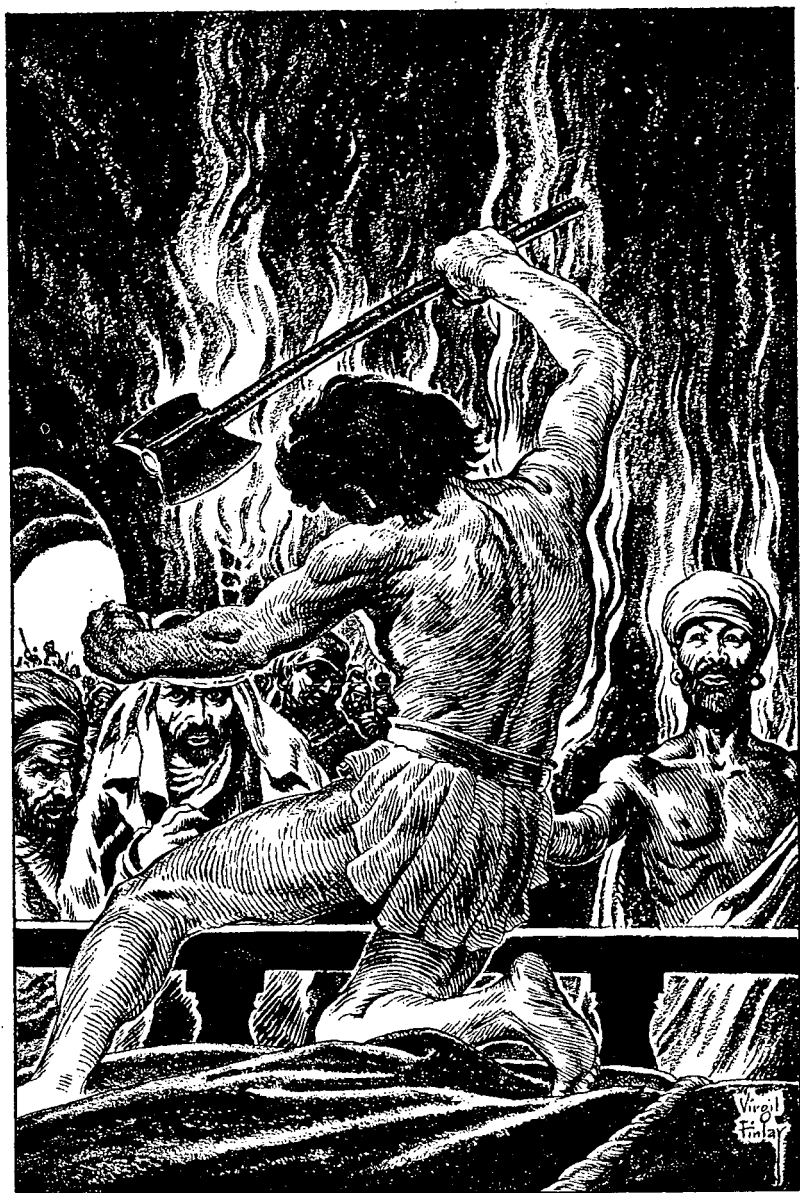
It was full dark when they reached their mooring, at an ancient stone dock beside a broad square with worn old buildings on three sides of it. Derech went into the town and so did the crew, but for different reasons. Arrin stayed on deck, lying on the bales with her chin on her wrists, staring at the lights and listening to the noises like a sulky child forbidden to play some dangerous but fascinating game. Derech did not allow her in the streets alone.

Out of sheer boredom, Carey went to sleep.

He did not know how long he had slept, a few minutes or a few hours, when he was wakened sharply by Arrin's wildcat scream.

III

THERE were men on the deck outside. Carey could hear them scrambling around and cursing the woman, and someone was saying something about an Earthman. He rolled out of his bunk. He was still wearing the Earth-made coverall that was all



the clothing he had until Derech came back. He stripped it off in a wild panic and shoved it far down under the tumbled furs. Arrin did not scream again but he thought he could hear muffled sounds as though she was trying to. He shivered, naked in the chill dark.

Footsteps came light and swift across the deck. Carey reached out and lifted from its place on the cabin wall a long-handled axe that was used to cut loose the deck cargo lashings in case of emergency. And as though the axe had spoken to him, Carey knew what he was going to do.

The shapes of men appeared in the doorway, dark and huddled against the glow of the deck lights.

Carey gave a Dryland war-cry that split the night. He leaped forward, swinging the axe.

The men disappeared out of the doorway as though they had been jerked on strings. Carey emerged from the cabin onto the deck, where the torchlight showed him clearly, and he whirled the axe around his head as he had learned to do years ago when he first understood both the possibility and the immense value of being able to go Martian. Inevitably he had got himself embroiled in unscholarly, unarcheological matters like tribal wars and raiding, and he had

acquired some odd skills. Now he drove the dark, small, startled men ahead of the axe-blade. Yelling, he drove them over the low rail and onto the dock, and he stood above them in the torchlight while they stared at him, five astonished men with silver rings in their ears and very sharp knives in their belts.

Carey quoted some Dryland sayings about Low-Canallers that brought the blood flushing into their cheeks. Then he asked them what their business was.

One of them, who wore a kilt of vivid yellow, said, "We were told there was an Earthman hiding."

And who told you? Carey wondered. Mr. Wales, through some Martian spy? Of course, Mr. Wales—who else? He was beginning to hate Mr. Wales. But he laughed and said, "Do I look like an Earthman?"

He made the axe-blade flicker in the light. He had let his hair grow long and ragged, and it was a good desert color, tawny brown. His naked body was lean and long-muscled like a desert man's, and he had kept it hard. Arrin came up to him rubbing her bruised mouth and staring at him as surprised as the Valisians.

The man in the yellow kilt said again, "We were told . . ."

Other people had begun to gather in the dockside square,

both men and women, idle, curious, and cruel.

"My name is Marah," Carey said. "I left the Wells of Tamboina with a price on my head for murder." The Wells were far enough away that he need not fear a fellow-tribesman rising to dispute his story. "Does anybody here want to collect it?"

THE people watched him. The torch-flames blew in the dry wind, scattering the light across their upturned faces. Carey began to be afraid.

Close beside him Arrin whispered, "Will you be recognized?"

"No." He had been here three times with Dryland bands but it was hardly likely that anyone would remember one specific tribesman out of the numbers that floated through.

"Then stand steady," Arrin said.

He stood. The people watched him, whispering and smiling among themselves. Then the man in the yellow kilt said,

"Earthman or Drylander, I don't like your face."

The crowd laughed, and a forward movement began. Carey could hear the sweet small chiming of the bells the women wore. He gripped the axe and told Arrin to get away from him. "If you know where Derech's gone, go after him. I'll hold them as long as I can."

He did not know whether she left him or not. He was watching the crowd, seeing the sharp blades flash. It seemed ridiculous, in this age of space flight and atomic power, to be fighting with axe and knife. But Mars had had nothing better for a long time, and the UW Peace and Disarmament people hoped to take even those away from them some day. On Earth, Carey remembered, there were still peoples who hardened their wooden spears in the fire and ate their enemies. The knives, in any case, could kill efficiently enough. He stepped back a little from the rail to give the axe free play, and he was not cold any longer, but warm with a heat that stung his nerve-ends.

Derech's voice shouted across the square.

The crowd paused. Carey could see over their heads to where Derech, with about half his crew around him, was forcing his way through. He looked and sounded furious.

"I'll kill the first man that touches him!" he yelled.

The man in the yellow kilt asked politely, "What is he to you?"

"He's money, you fool! Passage money that I won't collect till I reach Barrakesh, and not then unless he's alive and able to get it for me. And if he doesn't, I'll see to him myself." Derech

sprang up onto the barge deck. "Now clear off. Or you'll have more killing to do than you'll take pleasure in."

His men were lined up with him now along the rail, and the rest of the crew were coming. Twelve tough armed men did not look like much fun. The crowd began to drift away, and the original five went reluctantly with them. Derech posted a watch and took Carey into the cabin.

"Get into these," he said, throwing down a bundle he had taken from one of the men. Carey laid aside his axe. He was shaking now with relief and his fingers stumbled over the knots. The outer wrapping was a thick desert cloak. Inside was a leather kilt, well worn and adorned with clanking bronze bosses, a wide bronze collar for the neck and a leather harness for weapons that was black with use.

"They came off a dead man," Derech said. "There are sandals underneath." He took a long desert knife from his girdle and tossed it to Carey. "And this. And now, my friend, we are in trouble."

"I thought I did rather well," Carey said, buckling kilt and harness. They felt good. Perhaps some day, if he lived, he would settle down to being the good gray Dr. Carey, archeologist emeritus, but the day was not

yet. "Someone told them there was an Earthman here."

DERECH nodded. "I have friends here, men who trust me, men I trust. They warned me. That's why I routed my crew out of the brothels, and unhappy they were about it, too."

Carey laughed. "I'm grateful to them." Arrin had come in and was sitting on the edge of her bunk, watching Carey. He swung the cloak around him and hooked the bronze catch at the throat. The rough warmth of the cloth was welcome. "Wales will know now that I'm with you. This was his way of finding out for sure."

"You might have been killed," Arrin said.

Carey shrugged. "It wouldn't be a calamity. They'd rather have me dead than lose me, though of course none of them would dream of saying so. Point is, he won't be fooled by the masquerade, and he won't wait for Barrakesh. He'll be on board as soon as you're well clear of Valkis and he'll have enough force with him to make it good."

"All true," said Derech. "So. Let him have the barge." He turned to Arrin. "If you're still hell-bent to come with us, get ready. And remember, you'll be riding for a long time."

To Carey he said, "Better keep clear of the town. I'll have mounts and supplies by the time

Phobos rises. Where shall we meet?"

"By the lighthouse," Carey said. Derech nodded and went out. Carey went out too and waited on the deck while Arrin changed her clothes. A few minutes later she joined him, wrapped in a long cloak. She had taken the bells from her hair and around her ankles, and she moved quietly now, light and lithe as a boy. She grinned at him. "Come, desert man. What did you say your name was?"

"Marah."

"Don't forget your axe."

They left the barge. Only one torch burned now on the deck. Some of the lights had died around the square. This was deserted, but there was still sound and movement in plenty along the streets that led into it. Carey guided Arrin to the left along the canal bank. He did not see anyone watching them, or following them. The sounds and the lights grew fainter. The buildings they passed now were empty, their doors and windows open to the wind. Deimos was in the sky, and some of the roofs showed moonlight through them, shafts of pale silver touching the drifted dust that covered the floors. Carey stopped several times to listen, but he heard nothing except the wind. He began to feel better. He hurried Arrin with long strides, and now

they moved away from the canal and up a broken street that led toward the cliffs.

THE street became a flight of steps cut in the rock. There were roofless stone houses on either side, clinging to the cliffs row on ragged row like the abandoned nests of sea-birds. Carey's imagination, as always, peopled them, hung them with nets and gear, livened them with lights and voices and appropriate smells. At the top of the steps he paused to let Arrin get her breath, and he looked down across the centuries at the torches of Valkis burning by the canal.

"What are you thinking?" Arrin asked.

"I'm thinking that nothing, not people nor oceans, should ever die."

"The Ramas lived forever."

"Too long, anyway. And that wasn't good, I know. But still it makes me sad to think of men building these houses and working and raising their families, looking forward to the future."

"You're an odd one," Arrin said. "When I first met you, I couldn't understand what it was that made Derech love you. You were so—quiet. Tonight I could see. But now you've gone all broody and soft again. Why do you care so much about dust and old bones?"

"Curiosity. I'll never know the end of the story, but I can at least know the beginning."

They moved on again, and now they were walking across the basin of a harbor, with the great stone quays towering above them, gnawed and rounded by the wind. Ahead on a crumbling promontory the shaft of a broken tower pointed skyward. They came beneath it, where ships had used to come, and presently Carey heard the jingling and padding of animals coming toward them. Before the rise of Phobos they were mounted and on their way.

"This is your territory," said Derech. "I will merely ride."

"Then you and Arrin can handle the pack animals." Carey took the lead. They left the city behind, climbing to the top of the cliffs. The canal showed like a ribbon of steel in the moonlight far below, and then was gone. A range of mountains had come down here to the sea, forming a long curving peninsula. Only their bare bones were left, and through that skeletal mass of rock Carey took his little band by a trail he had followed once and hoped that he remembered.

They travelled all that way by night, lying in the shelter of the rocks by day, and three times a flier passed over them like a wheeling hawk, searching. Carey thought more than once that he

had lost the way, though he never said so, and he was pleasantly surprised when they found the sea-bottom again just where it should be on the other side of the range, with the ford he remembered across the canal. They crossed it by moonlight, stopping only to fill up their water bags. At dawn they were on a ridge above Barrakesh.

They looked down, and Derech said, "I think we can forget our southbound caravan."

Trade was for times of peace, and now the men of Kesh and Shun were gathering for war, even as Derech had said, without need of any Dr. Carey to stir them to it.

They filled the streets. They filled the *serais*. They camped in masses by the gates and along the banks of the canal and around the swampy lake that was its terminus. The vast herds of animals broke down the dikes, trampled the irrigation ditches and devoured the fields. And across the desert more riders were coming, long files of them with pennons waving and lances glinting in the morning light. Wild and far away, Carey heard the skirling of the desert pipes.

"The minute we go down there," he said, "we are part of the army. Any man that turns his back on Barrakesh now will get a spear through it for cowardice."

HIS face became hard and cruel with a great rage. Presently this horde would roll northward, sweeping up more men from the Low-Canal towns as it passed, joining ultimately with other hordes pouring in through the easterly gates of the Drylands. The people of the City-States would fall like butchered sheep, and perhaps even the dome of Kahora would come shattering down. But sooner or later the guns would be brought up, and then the Drylanders would do the falling, all because of good men like Woodthorpe who only wanted to help.

Carey said, "I am going to Sinharat. But you know how much chance a small party has, away from the caravan track and the wells."

"I know," said Derech.

"You know how much chance we have of evading Wales, without the protection of a caravan."

"You tell me how I can go quietly home, and I'll do it."

"You can wait for your barge and go back to Valkis."

"I couldn't do that," Derech said seriously. "My men would laugh at me. I suggest we stop wasting time. Here in the desert, time is water."

"Speaking of water," Arrin said, "how about when we get there? And how about getting back?"

Derech said, "Dr. Carey has

heard that there is a splendid well at Sinharat."

"He's heard," said Arrin, "but he doesn't know. Same as the records." She gave Carey a look, only half scornful.

Carey smiled briefly. "The well I have on pretty good authority. It's in the coral deep under the city, so it can be used without actually breaking the tabu. The Shunni don't go near it unless they're desperate, but I talked to a man who had."

He led them down off the ridge and away from Barrakesh. And Derech cast an uneasy glance at the sky.

"I hope Wales did set a trap for us there. And I hope he'll sit a while waiting for us to spring it."

There was a strict law against the use of fliers over tribal lands without special permission, which would be unprocurable now. But they both knew that Wales would not let that stop him.

"The time could come," Carey said grimly, "that we'd be glad to see him."

He led them a long circle northward to avoid the war parties coming in to Barrakesh. Then he struck out across the deadly waste of the sea-bottom, straight for Sinharat.

HE lost track of time very quickly. The days blurred

together into one endless hell wherein they three and the staggering animals toiled across vast slopes of rock up-tilted to the sun, or crept under reefs of rotten coral with sand around them as smooth and bright as a burning-glass. At night there was moonlight and bitter cold, but the cold did nothing to alleviate their thirst. There was only one good thing about the journey, and that was the thing that worried Carey the most. In all that cruel and empty sky, no flier ever appeared.

"The desert is a big place," Arrin said, looking at it with loathing. "Perhaps he couldn't find us. Perhaps he's given up."

"Not him," said Carey.

Derech said, "Maybe he thinks we're dead anyway, and why bother."

Maybe, Carey thought. Maybe. But sometimes as he rode or walked he would curse at Wales out loud and glare at the sky, demanding to know what he was up to. There was never any answer.

The last carefully-hoarded drop of water went. And Carey forgot about Wales and thought only of the well of Sinharat, cold and clear in the coral.

He was thinking of it as he plodded along, leading the beast that was now almost as weak as he. The vision of the well so occupied him that it was some lit-

tle time before the message from his bleared and sun-struck eyes got through it and registered on his brain. Then he halted in sudden wild alarm.

He was walking, not on smooth sand, but in the trampled marks of many riders.

IV

THE others came out of their stupor as he pointed, warning them to silence. The broad track curved ahead and vanished out of sight beyond a great reef of white coral. The wind had not had time to do more than blur the edges of the individual prints.

Mounting and whipping their beasts unmercifully, Carey and the others fled the track. The reef stood high above them like a wall. Along its base were cavernous holes, and they found one big enough to hold them all. Carey went on alone and on foot to the shoulder of the reef, where the riders had turned it, and the wind went with him, piping and crying in the vast honeycomb of the coral.

He crept around the shoulder and then he saw where he was.

On the other side of the reef was a dry lagoon, stretching perhaps half a mile to a coral island that stood up tall in the hard clear sunlight, its naked cliffs beautifully striated with deep rose and white and delicate pink.

A noble stairway went up from the desert to a city of walls and towers so perfectly built from many-shaded marble and so softly sculptured by time that it was difficult to tell where the work of men began and ended. Carey saw it through a shimmering haze of exhaustion and wonder, and knew that he looked at Sinharat, the Ever-Living.

The trampled track of the Shunni warriors went out across the lagoon. It swept furiously around what had been a parked flier, and then passed on, leaving behind it battered wreckage and two dark sprawled shapes. It ended at the foot of the cliffs, where Carey could see a sort of orderly turmoil of men and animals. There were between twenty-five and thirty warriors, as nearly as he could guess. They were making camp.

Carey knew what that meant. There was someone in the city.

Carey did not move for some time. He stared at the beautiful marble city shimmering on its lovely pedestal of coral. He wanted to weep, but there was not enough moisture left in him to make tears, and his despair was gradually replaced by a feeble anger. All right, you bastards, he thought. All right!

He went back to Derech and Arrin and told them what he had seen.

"Wales just came ahead of us

and waited. Why bother to search a whole desert when he knew where we were going? This time he'd have us for sure. Water. We couldn't run away." Carey grinned horribly with his cracked lips and swollen tongue. "Only the Shunni found him first. War party. They must have seen the flier go over—came to check if it landed here. Caught two men in it. But the rest are in Sinharat."

"How do you know?" asked Derech.

"The Shunni won't go into the city except as a last resort. If they catch a trespasser there they just hold the well and wait. Sooner or later he comes down."

Arrin said, "How long can we wait? We've had no water for two days."

"Wait, hell," said Carey. "We can't wait. I'm going in."

Now, while they still had a shred of strength. Another day would be too late.

Derech said, "I suppose a quick spear is easier than thirst."

"We may escape both," said Carey, "if we're very careful. And very lucky."

He told them what to do.

AN hour or so later Carey followed the warriors' track out across the dry lagoon. He walked, or rather staggered, leading the animals. Arrin rode on one, her cloak pulled over her

head and her face covered in sign of mourning. Between two of the beasts, on an improvised litter made of blankets and pack lashings, Derech lay wrapped from head to foot in his cloak, a too-convincing imitation of a corpse. Carey heard the shouts and saw the distant riders start toward them, and he was frightened. The smallest slip, the most minor mistake, could give them away, and then he did not think that anything on Mars could save them. But thirst was more imperative than fear.

There was something more. Carey passed the two bodies in the sand beside the wrecked flier. He saw that they were both dark-haired Martians, and he looked at the towers of Sinharat with wolfish eyes. Wales was up there, still alive, still between him and what he wanted. Carey's hand tightened on the axe. He was no longer entirely sane on the subject of Howard Wales and the records of the Ramas.

When the riders were within spear-range he halted and rested the axe-head in the sand, as a token. He waited, saying softly, "For God's sake now, be careful."

The riders reined in, sending the sand flying. Carey said to them, "I claim the death right."

He stood swaying over his axe while they looked at him, and at the muffled woman, and at the dusty corpse. They were six, tall

hard fierce-eyed men with their long spears held ready. Finally one of them said, "How did you come here?"

"My sister's husband," said Carey, indicating Derech, "died on the march to Barrakesh. Our tribal law says he must rest in his own place. But there are no caravans now. We had to come alone, and in a great sandstorm we lost the track. We wandered for many days until we crossed your trail."

"Do you know where you are?" asked the Drylander.

Carey averted his eyes from the city. "I know now. But if a man is dying it is permitted to use the well. We are dying."

"Use it, then," said the Drylander. "But keep your ill-omen away from our camp. We are going to the war as soon as we finish our business here. We want no corpse-shadow on us."

"Outlanders?" Carey asked, a rhetorical question in view of the flier and the un-Dryland bodies.

"Outlanders. Who else is foolish enough to wake the ghosts in the Forbidden City?"

Carey shook his head. "Not I. I do not wish even to see it."

The riders left them, returning to the camp. Carey moved on slowly toward the cliffs. It became apparent where the well must be. A great arching cave-mouth showed in the rose-pink

coral and men were coming and going there, watering their animals. Carey approached it and began the monotonous chant that etiquette required, asking that way be made for the dead, so that warriors and pregnant women and persons undergoing ritual purifications would be warned to go aside. The warriors made way. Carey passed out of the cruel sunlight into the shadow of an irregular vaulted passage, quite high and wide, with a floor that sloped upward, at first gently and then steeply, until suddenly the passage ended in an echoing cathedral room dimlit by torches that picked out here and there the shape of a fantastic flying buttress of coral. In the center of the room, in a kind of broad basin, was the well.

NOW for the first time Arrin broke her silence with a soft anguished cry. There were seven or eight warriors guarding the well, as Carey had known there would be, but they drew away and let Carey's party severely alone. Several men were in the act of watering their mounts, and as though in deference to tabu Carey circled around to get as far away from them as possible. In the gloom he made out the foot of an age-worn stairway leading upward through the coral. Here he stopped.

He helped Arrin down and made her sit, and then dragged Derech from the litter and laid him on the hard coral. The animals bolted for the well and he made no effort to hold them. He filled one of the bags for Arrin and then he flung himself alongside the beasts and drank and soaked himself in the beautiful cold clear water. After that he crouched still for a few moments, in a kind of daze, until he remembered that Derech too needed water.

He filled two more bags and took them to Arrin, kneeling beside her as though in tender concern as she sat beside her dead. His spread cloak covered what she was doing, holding the water-bag to Derech's mouth so that he could drink. Carey spoke softly and quickly. Then he went back to the animals. He began to fight them away from the water so that they should not founder themselves. The activity covered what was going on in the shadows behind them. Carey led them, hissing and stamping, to where Arrin and Derech had been, still using them as a shield in case the guards were watching. He snatched up his axe and the remaining water-bag and let the animals go and ran as fast as he could up the stairway. It spiralled, and he was stumbling in pitch darkness around the second curve before the guards be-

low let out a great angry cry.

He did not know whether they would follow or not. Somebody fumbled for him in the blackness and Derech's voice muttered something urgent. He could hear Arrin panting like a spent hound. His own knees shook with weakness and he thought what a fine militant crew they were to be taking on Wales and his men and thirty angry Shunni. Torchlight flickered against the turn of the wall below and there was a confusion of voices. They fled upward, pulling each other along, and it seemed that the Shunni reached a point beyond which they did not care to go. The torchlight and the voices vanished. Carey and the others climbed a little farther and then dropped exhausted on the worn treads.

Arrin asked, "Why didn't they follow us?"

"Why should they? Our water won't last long. They can wait."

"Yes," said Arrin. And then, "How are we going to get away?"

Carey answered, "That depends on Wales."

"I don't understand."

"On whether, and how soon, somebody sends a flier out here to see what happened to him." He patted the water-bags. "That's why these are so important. They give us time."

They started up the stair

again, treading in the worn hollows made by other feet. The Ramas must have come this way for water for a very long time. Presently a weak daylight filtered down to them. And then a man's voice, tight with panic, cried out somewhere above them, "I hear them! They're coming . . ."

The voice of Howard Wales answered sharply. "Wait!" Then in English it called down, "Carey. Dr. Carey. Is that you?"

"It is," Carey shouted back.

"Thank Heaven," said Wales. "I saw you, but I wasn't sure . . . Come up, man, come up, and welcome. We're all in the same trap now."

V

SINHARAT was a city without people, but it was not dead. It had a memory and a voice. The wind gave it breath, and it sang, from the countless tiny organ-pipes of the coral, from the hollow mouths of marble doorways and the narrow throats of streets. The slender towers were like tall flutes, and the wind was never still. Sometimes the voice of Sinharat was soft and gentle, murmuring about everlasting youth and the pleasures thereof. Again it was strong and fierce with pride, crying *You die, but I do not!* Sometimes it was mad, laughing and hateful. But always the song was evil.

Carey could understand now why Sinharat was tabu. It was not only because of an ancient dread. It was the city itself, now, in the sharp sunlight or under the gliding moons. It was a small city. There had never been more than perhaps three thousand Ramas, and this remote little island had given them safety and room enough. But they had built close, and high. The streets ran like topless tunnels between the walls and the towers reached impossibly thin and tall into the sky. Some of them had lost their upper storeys and some had fallen entirely, but in the main they were still beautiful. The colors of the marble were still lovely. Many of the buildings were perfect and sound, except that wind and time had erased the carvings on their walls so that only in certain angles of light did a shadowy face leap suddenly into being, prideful and mocking with smiling lips, or a procession pass solemnly toward some obliterated worship.

Perhaps it was only the wind and the half-seen watchers that gave Sinharat its feeling of eerie wickedness. Carey did not think so. The Ramas had built something of themselves into their city, and it was rather, he imagined, as one of the Rama women might have been had one met her, graceful and lovely but with something wrong about the eyes.

Even the matter-of-fact Howard Wales was uncomfortable in the city, and the three surviving City-State men who were with him went about like dogs with their tails tight to their bellies. Even Derech lost some of his cheerful arrogance, and Arrin never left his side.

The feeling was worse inside the buildings. Here were the halls and chambers where the Ramas had lived. Here were the possessions they had handled, the carvings and faded frescoes they had looked at. The ever-young, the Ever-living immortals, the stealers of others' lives, had walked these corridors and seen themselves reflected in the surfaces of polished marble, and Carey's nerves quivered with the nearness of them after all this long time.

There were traces of a day when Sinharat had had an advanced technology equal to, if not greater, than any Carey had yet seen on Mars. The inevitable reversion to the primitive had come with the exhaustion of resources. There was one rather small room where much wrecked equipment lay in crystal shards and dust, and Carey knew that this was the place where the Ramas had exchanged their old bodies for new. From some of the frescoes, done with brilliantly sadistic humor, he knew that the victims were generally killed

soon, but not too soon, after the exchange was completed.

STILL he could not find the place where the archives had been kept. Outside, Wales and his men, generally with Derech's help and Arrin as a lookout, were sweating to clear away rubble from the one square that was barely large enough for a flier to land in. Wales had been in contact with Kahora before the unexpected attack. They knew where he was, and when there had been too long a time without a report from him they would certainly come looking. If they had a landing place cleared by then, and the scanty water supply, severely rationed, kept them alive, and the Shunni did not become impatient, they would be all right.

"Only," Carey told them, "if that flier does come, be ready to jump quick. Because the Shunni will attack then."

He had not had any trouble with Howard Wales. He had expected it. He had come up the last of the stairway with his axe ready. Wales shook his head. "I have a heavy-duty shocker," he said. "Even so, I wouldn't care to take you on. You can put down the axe, Dr. Carey."

The Martians were armed too. Carey knew they could have taken him easily. Perhaps they were saving their charges against the

Shunni, who played the game of war for keeps.

Carey said, "I will do what I came here to do."

Wales shrugged. "My assignment was to bring you in. I take it there won't be any more trouble about that now—if any of us get out of here. Incidentally, I saw what was happening at Barakesh, and I can testify that you could not possibly have had any part in it. I'm positive that some of my superiors are thundering asses, but that's nothing new, either. So go ahead. I won't hinder you."

Carey had gone ahead, on a minimum of water, sleep, and the dry desert rations he had in his belt-pouch. Two and a half days were gone, and the taste of defeat was getting stronger in his mouth by the hour. Time was getting short, no one could say how short. And then almost casually he crawled over a great fallen block of marble into a long room with rows of vault doors on either side, and a hot wave of excitement burned away his weariness. The bars of beautiful rustless alloy slid easily under his hands. And he was dazed at the treasure of knowledge that he had found, tortured by the realization that he could only take a fraction of it with him and might well never see the rest of it again.

THE Ramas had arranged their massive archives according to a simple and orderly dating system. It did not take him long to find the records he wanted, but even that little time was almost too much.

Derech came shouting after him. Carey closed the vault he was in and scrambled back over the fallen block, clutching the precious spools. "Flier!" Derech kept saying. "Hurry!" Carey could hear the distant cries of the Shunni.

He ran with Derech and the cries came closer. The warriors had seen the flier too and now they knew that they must come into the city. Carey raced through the narrow twisting street that led to the square. When he came into it he could see the flier hanging on its rotors about thirty feet overhead, very ginger about coming down in that cramped space. Wales and the Martians were frantically waving. The Shunni came in two waves, one from the well-stair and one up the cliffs. Carey picked up his axe. The shockers began to crackle.

He hoped they would hold the Drylanders off because he did not want to have to kill anyone, and he particularly did not want to get killed, not right now. "Get to the flier!" Wales yelled at him, and he saw that it was just settling down, making a great

wind and dust. The warriors in the forefront of the attack were dropping or staggering as the stunning charges hit them, sparking off their metal ornaments and the tips of their spears. The first charge was broken up, but no one wanted to stay for the second. Derech had Arrin and was lifting her bodily into the flier. Hands reached out and voices shouted unnecessary pleas for haste. Carey threw away his axe and jumped for the hatch. The Martians crowded in on top of him and then Wales, and the pilot took off so abruptly that Wales' legs were left dangling outside. Carey caught him and pulled him in. Wales laughed, in an odd wild way, and the flier rose up among the towers of Sinharat in a rattle of flung spears.

* * *

The technicians had had trouble regearing their equipment to the Rama microtapes. The results were still far from perfect, but the United Worlds Planetary Assistance Committee, hastily assembled at Kahora, were not interested in perfection. They were Alan Woodthorpe's superiors, and they had a decision to make, and little time in which to make it. The great tide was beginning to roll north out of the Drylands, moving at the steady

marching pace of the desert beasts. And Woodthorpe could no longer blame this all on Carey.

Looking subdued and rather frightened, Woodthorpe sat beside Carey in the chamber where the hearing was being held. Derech was there, and Wales, and some high brass from the City-States who were getting afraid for their borders, and two Dryland chiefs who knew Carey as Carey, not as a tribesman, and trusted him enough to come in. Carey thought bitterly that this hearing should have been held long ago. Only the Committee had not understood the potential seriousness of the situation. They had been told, plainly and often. But they had preferred to believe experts like Woodthorpe rather than men like Carey, who had some specialized knowledge but were not trained to evaluate the undertaking as a whole.

Now in a more chastened mood they watched as Carey's tapes went whispering through the projectors.

They saw an island city in a blue sea. People moved in its streets. There were ships in its harbors and the sounds of life. Only the sea had shrunk down from the tops of the coral cliffs. The lagoon was a shallow lake wide-rimmed with beaches, and the outer reef stood bare above a feeble surf. A man's voice spoke in the ancient High Mar-

tian, somewhat distorted by the reproduction and blurred by the voice of a translator speaking Esperanto. Carey shut his ears to everything but the voice, the man, who spoke across the years.

"Nature grins at us these days, reminding us that even planets die. We who have loved life so much that we have taken the lives of countless others in order to retain it, can now see the beginning of our own inevitable end. Even though this may yet be thousands of years in the future, the thought of it has had strange effects. For the first time some of our people are voluntarily choosing death. Others demand younger and younger hosts, and change them constantly. Most of us have come to have some feeling of remorse, not for our immortality but for the method by which we achieved it.

"One murder can be remembered and regretted. Ten thousand murders become as meaningless as ten thousand love affairs or ten thousand games of chess. Time and repetition grind them all to the same dust. Yet now we do regret, and a naive passion has come to us, a passion to be forgiven, if not by our victims then perhaps by ourselves.

"Thus our great project is undertaken. The people of Kharif, because their coasts are accessible and their young people ex-

ceptionally handsome and sturdy, have suffered more from us than any other single nation. We will try now to make some restitution."

THE scene shifted from Sinharat to a desolate stretch of desert coastline beside the shrunken sea. The land had once been populous. There were the remains of cities and town, connected by paved roads. There had been factories and power stations, all the appurtenances of an advanced technology. These were now rusting away, and the wind blew ochre dust to bury them.

"For a hundred years," said the Rama voice, "it has not rained."

There was an oasis, with wells of good water. Tall brown-haired men and women worked the well-sweeps, irrigating fields of considerable extent. There was a village of neat huts, housing perhaps a thousand people.

"Mother Mars has killed far more of her children than we. The fortunate survivors live in 'cities' like these. The less fortunate . . ."

A long line of beasts and hooded human shapes moved across a bitter wasteland. And the Dryland chiefs cried out, "Our people!"

"We will give them water again," said the Rama voice.

The spool ended. In the brief interval before the next one began, Woodthorpe coughed uneasily and muttered, "This was all long ago, Carey. The winds of change . . ."

"Are blowing up a real storm, Woodthorpe. You'll see why."

The tapes began again. A huge plant now stood at the edge of the sea, distilling fresh water from the salt. A settlement had sprung up beside it, with fields and plantations of young trees.

"It has gone well," said the Rama voice. "It will go better with time, for their short generations move quickly."

The settlement became a city. The population grew, spread, built more cities, planted more crops. The land flourished.

"Many thousands live," the Rama said, "who would otherwise not have been born. We have repaid our murders."

The spool ended.

Woodthorpe said, "But we're not trying to atone for anything. We . . ."

"If my house burns down," said Carey, "I do not greatly care whether it was by a stroke of lightning, deliberate arson, or a child playing with matches. The end result is the same."

The third spool began.

A different voice spoke now. Carey wondered if the owner of the first had chosen death himself, or simply lacked the heart

to go on with the record. The distilling plant was wearing out and metals for repair were poor and difficult to find. The solar batteries could not be replaced. The stream of water dwindled. Crops died. There was famine and panic, and then the pumps stopped altogether and the cities were stranded like the hulks of ships in dry harbors.

THE Rama voice said, "These are the consequences of the one kind act we have ever done. Now these thousands that we called into life must die as their forebears did. The cruel laws of survival that we caused them to forget are all to be learned again. They had suffered once, and mastered it, and were content. Now there is nothing we can do to help. We can only stand and watch."

"Shut it off," said Woodthorpe.

"No," said Carey, "see it out."

They saw it out.

"Now," said Carey, "I will remind you that Kharif was the homeland from which most of the Drylands were settled." He was speaking to the Committee more than to Woodthorpe. "These so-called primitives have been through all this before, and they have long memories. Their tribal legends are explicit about what happened to them the last time they put their trust in the transitory works of men. Now

can you understand why they're so determined to fight?"

Woodthorpe looked at the disturbed and frowning faces of the Committee. "But," he said, "it wouldn't be like that now. Our resources . . ."

"Are millions of miles away on other planets. How long can you guarantee to keep *your* pumps working? And the Ramas at least had left the natural water sources for the survivors to go back to. You want to destroy those so they would have nothing." Carey glanced at the men from the City-States. "The City-States would pay the price for that. They have the best of what there is, and with a large population about to die of famine and thirst . . ." He shrugged, and then went on,

"There are other ways to help. Food and medicines. Education, to enable the young people to look for greener pastures in other places, if they wish to. In the meantime, there is an army on the move. You have the power to stop it. You've heard all there is to be said. Now the chiefs are waiting to hear what you will say."

The Chairman of the Committee conferred with the members. The conference was quite brief.

"Tell the chiefs," the Chairman said, "that it is not our intent to create wars. Tell them to go in peace. Tell them the Re-

habilitation Project for Mars is cancelled."

* * *

The great tide rolled slowly back into the Drylands and dispersed. Carey went through a perfunctory hearing on his activities, took his reprimand and dismissal with a light heart, shook hands with Howard Wales, and went back to Jekkara, to drink with Derech and walk be-

side the Low-Canal that would be there now for whatever ages were left to it in the slow course of a planet's dying.

And this was good. But at the end of the canal was Barrakesh, and the southward-moving caravans, and the long road to Sinharat. Carey thought of the vaults beyond the fallen block of marble, and he knew that someday he would walk that road again.

THE END

Continued from page 31

Jim heard the sudden sob that shook Mary. He put his arm about her shoulders and led her into the house.

Don Anderson remained in lunar orbit for two more days. Then he was ordered home. He landed safely.

There were expressions of national sorrow over the unexplained loss of the two astronauts, but plans were renewed for the next voyage. The President said that sacrifices must be expected if this great goal were to be achieved, and that it would be a betrayal of those who had already given their lives if the work were to stop now.

In Canada that winter, Jim was sure the wolves howled on

cold, moonlit nights more than ever before. And something new was happening to the moon. The silver light was taking on a faint tint of orange. The radio told of a very learned report by some astronomer who spoke obscurely of changes in albedo and percentages of atmospheric dust and angstroms of sunlight. Any fool could see the moon was changing color.

Jim listened to the wolves howling in the forest, and he thought of Cramer's Pond when he was a boy, and of a machine tumbling into a crevasse where a terrible darkness lay, and he wondered how long it would be.

THE END





THE STEEL NAPOLEON

By HARLAN ELLISON

*That sad, happy, attractive
repelling, Utopian, chaotic
World of Tomorrow! What
will it really be like? Of
course we can't know, but we
can predict. And that brings
us to this great action story—
in which Mr. Ellison predicts
that tomorrow's world will
hold a great future for
juvenile delinquents.*

WILLIAM B. FUHR took pride in the fact that way back there somewhere—in a time before there were inverspace ships, in fact before there were cars or planes—one of his descendants was Billy the Kid.

It was that, perhaps, which had led him swiftly away from his training as a ship's pharmacist, and into the Gunman's Guild. But whether it had been that lone fact, or the daily danger that confronted him as a resident of Slobtown, in a matter of two years—by the time he was twenty-two years old—Billy Fuhr had come the crack dead

shot of all Slobtown; and they had heard of him in Moneyville.

Working for Sloth Leekman—undisputed racket boss of Slobtown—Billy turned twenty-two with twenty-nine killings under his belt. Nine of them women, and one a thirteen-year-old spring-knife expert riding shotgun on Below Tracey's gin-wagon. He had often regretted puncturing the kid, but he'd caught him going through Sloth's territory on the gin-wagon, and it had been either a bullet for the kid—or a sliced throat for Billy.

It was, in fact, the day after his twenty-second birthday that the hooded musclers from Moneyville came down into the shacks and mud-holes of Slobtown. To find Billy.

He caught two of them with the Magnum, and one with the .72 before they swarmed over him and tapped him behind the ear with a lead-wound sap.

Through the descending fog of unconsciousness, Billy felt the remaining fifteen black-clad musclers lift him and drop him into the enclosing bubble-seat of a thruway-robot-controlled trundler.

Just as the cockpit sighed down pneumatically over him, he heard the gutter-gangs pil-

ing out of the ruined houses, caves, shattered store-fronts, descending on the musclers. He heard the snap of sling-shots driving glass slivers, and the pop of zip-guns, and the screams of the black-clad men. And even as the acceleration pressed him back into deeper unconsciousness, up against the padded seats of the landcar, he got a tiny flicker of joy in knowing they'd never get back to their wealthy boss in Moneyville, whoever he might be.

The trundler car skirted the bomb holes and the blasted fragments, all that remained of what had been New York City, before.

Before the Eastern Bloc had set off the Great War. Before the needle-nosed rockets had come over and split the land. Before the death and the plagues and the starvation. Before those who had survived on top built Moneyville, and condemned the rest to supplying them, to living in Slobtown. It had become a hard world in which to live, and as William Fuhr came abruptly awake, he saw jagged reminders of that world. The jagged skyline that remained of the City.

He sat up, and realized he was held in place by three thin

metal arms, protruding from apertures in the robot control panel. He struggled for a moment, but only succeeded in ripping a hole in his vest. Then he cursed loudly, for the vest had been the best one available from Dingo the Bullet Man. It had stopped plenty of slugs from zips down in Slobtown, and had set him back a month's paycheck from Sloth Leekman.

Abruptly, as they swung around a corner, on which stood the shattered stump of a building, he caught sight of the shining, shimmering expanse of Moneyville. It stretched into the sky, with pillars and towers of brilliant reds, greens, violets, golds, silvers. The towers were encrusted with artificial diamonds, and the city glimmered like the nights of stars. He watched it with growing amazement. The force barrier had kept him out all these twenty-two years, kept out everyone from Slobtown, in fact, for much longer. Now here he was, riding right up and into it.

Even as he thought that, the force barrier glowed before them, and the cockpit of the trundler was opaqued. He assumed it was so he could not tell where the entrance point was.

He was forced to stare at his own reflection, cast upon the reflective inner surface of the cab.

He saw a face that looked younger than its years, yet somehow, older. He saw his mouth, with the faint white scar running up from its left corner. He had gotten *that* one during an election rumble with the Panthers from the East Side. He saw the nose that had been three times broken by thrown missiles. He saw the heavy eyebrows and the lank dark hair that hung over his face. The strong chin, the broad shoulders, the scars that lined his features.

After a long while, he got fed up with staring at himself, and slipped off to sleep. The purring of the trundler's engines lulled him quickly.

While he slept, the trundler slipped through the barrier.

The ceaseless purring of the trundler's engines cut out, and Billy woke up with a start. The hood of the landcar was still opaqued, but he knew the machine had stopped. A moment later the cab became transparent once more, then lifted, and sank into the body of the trundler. The robot arms unclamped themselves.

He sat up and looked around. He was inside a build-

ing, and the bright yellow of the walls was so brilliant it made him blink several times. From a series of louvres in the walls, he felt the breeze blowing in—good across his face after the stuffiness of the sealed cab.

The building seemed to be circular with nothing in it but a transparent tube that ran up through the center, and disappeared through the ceiling. Billy slipped out of the trundler and felt the faint prickling of his skin telling him he was being spy-beamed. He took a few steps.

"Take the tube up, we have it set." It was a hollow, wooden voice and Billy spotted the ceiling speaker at once. He did not, however, step to the lift tube. Instead, he walked around the perimeter of the building, looking for a way out.

"You're being watched," the voice said. Billy looked up, knowing the spies were catching his every expression. He finished his patrol of the wall. Nothing. He went back to the trundler, and tried to pry open its hood. He needed a weapon; a drive rod, a snap of wire, a chunk of metal, anything. But the hood was locked, and the landcar was empty.

"Satisfied, Mr. Fuhr?" the voice said.

He wasn't, but there was nothing he could do. His fist ached for something to hold; the cool butt of a .72 or the handle of a triple-edged knife. But he had nothing; and now he was going to have to use a different approach than the one that proved valuable in Slobtown. Violence pure and simple was the criterion out there... but this was Moneyville.

He walked slowly toward the shaft, and opened the sphincter in its side with a wave of his hand. The suction of the tube drew at him, and he spread his hands absently, just to be making a motion, just to be putting off the rise in the tube.

"We're waiting, Fuhr," the voice reminded him. He stepped into the tube and was drawn up immediately, and the suck-power neutralized itself on his body, just as he rose abreast of a second sphincter. He opened it, and stepped out, what he assumed to be at least twenty floors above the ground.

The room was as large as the lower one, of course; but instead of the solid brilliant yellow walls, windows from floor to ceiling, separated by pillars that glittered like many-colored jewels, con-

fronted him. The room was a hodge-podge of geometric figures. All of them were jeweled and glittering. Some were functional tables, chairs, vid-boxes, and cabinets. Others were just decoration. But the glare was tremendous, for the sun shone in through the windows, and its light ricocheted from every facet, making a terrible glare in Billy's eyes.

It was the glare that prevented his seeing the man for more than a minute.

A voice came out of the glare, told him to sit down. "The hell!" Billy rasped, and stepped to the side, hoping to escape the glare.

"Mr. Fuhr, I went to a great deal of trouble to have my employees find you, and it would be most unpleasant to have to burn you down before I put a proposition to you. Now—do you sit down, or do I turn on the beams that are focussed on you?" The voice was no longer hollow and loud. In fact, it was a mere whisper, caught up with a rasping edge that sounded like sun-charred grass scratching against the ground. An old voice, a very old voice.

Billy Fuhr walked carefully toward one of the cubistic nightmares serving for a chair. He walked, springing off the balls of his feet, as he

had learned to do in tight places, and sat down only with trepidation.

As he sat down, his eyes passed out of the glare area, and he saw the owner of the ancient voice. The man looked like a pixie.

His face was a wrinkled, nut-brown, that came down to a point at the chin. The eyes were thin slits, that wrinkled from one corner to the other. His nose was tiny and tilted impishly and Billy was certain his ears came to points.

But the mouth belied all the good humor of the rest of him. It was queerly gashed, indicating nothing but malice. The man was no taller than four feet, and he sat high up in a chair that reminded Billy of a solidly-built life guard's seat at the beach.

Billy slowly swung his eyes around. Trying to find the location of the beam apertures, in case he had to duck and run. Perhaps he could escape their direct-line fire before they could swivel. "You won't see them, Mr. Fuhr," the pixie-man said. "They are in areas of strongest glare.

"Now. If you've convinced yourself that you are quite helpless, perhaps we can get down to business. I want to hire you."

Billy lashed out in retaliation, "Don't never tell me I'm helpless. I'm Billy Fuhr, and way back I was sired by Billy Bonney. You know who that was?"

The pixie-man chuckled dryly. His evil mouth twitched as he replied: "Mr. Fuhr, whatever you are, you are *not* descended from Billy the Kid. Bonney never married; however, I can easily believe you might be a bastard descendant. It fits you well."

Billy was out of the chair. His fists lashed out. He swung for the pixie-man's legs, hoping to pull him down before the beams flashed. It was irrational but that was the only thing he had left—his heritage. That, and his gunmanship. No one could assault him so, and live.

He stumbled forward. His hands almost closed about the pixie-man's legs. Almost. Not quite. As they came within a fraction of an inch of the tight body-trousers, green lightning erupted from nowhere.

Billy screamed as the lightning built and flowed and leaped from floor to body and back again. It arced over him, and drew every follicle of lank brown hair straight erect. His eyeballs started from his head,

and he fell back, stock-rooted and rigid, legs apart, arms up-thrust, as though he were being crucified.

The pain was excruciating. It was a weird combination of electricity and something else, something nameless. Every stretch of flesh on his body was lit with pain; a billion exploring needles of unbelievable sharpness stuck and stuck and pierced again, right to the center of his body; right to the arch of his groin, right to the pulmonary artery of his heart. He gagged and then he was a writhing mass of jelly on the floor. And still the lightning did not stop. Over its hiss and roar he heard someone scream. He realized it was he himself.

At that moment the bolts ceased, and he lay wet, bloody and aching—on the floor at the pixie-man's feet. There was no resistance left.

The pixie-man's cackle came to him clearly, and despite the pain he felt the hatred rising in him, and he swore someday to put his hands to that papyrus throat, and squeeze squeeze squeeze.

"And now let's talk, Mr. Fuhr. My spies told me you were the one person in Slobtown who had some sense of achievement, of desire for power and position. Is that

true, Mr. Fuhr? Or have I wasted my time on you?"

Billy Fuhr willed himself to rise to his elbows. He stared up and for a minute his eyes were blind from the lightning attack. Then, slowly, mistily, his vision returned, and the fierce agony passed from him like cool water rolling off a stone. He sat up, and rose to his feet.

The pixie-man crossed his pipestem legs, and put a speculative twist on his mouth. "You seem to have recovered from my shield more quickly than most. Despite your adolescent manner, that is a good sign."

"Who are you?"

The pixie-man put a finger to his thin lips. "Now, now. I dislike noise intensely, Mr. Fuhr, and much more of it from you will force me to fry you permanently."

Billy felt helpless. It was chilling; knowing he could neither move nor stand still, neither come nor go. He was here, and he was at the mercy of the little brown-skinned man on the high chair.

The pixie-man said, "My name is Farquar. I own this tower, and several others. Have you ever heard of me?"

There was an anxious pleading quality to his voice, as

though it meant a great deal to him that down in Slobtown his name was known. Billy shook his head. The pixie-man adjusted his expression to compensate for his obvious disappointment.

"No mind, no mind. I'm well enough known in Moneyville. I have you here because *your* name has come to me on several occasions. I hear you are good with the gun? Is that true?"

Billy had regained much of his arrogance. It was all he had left to show. Inside he quivered. "Good? Just hand me something, anything, even a pop-gun, and I'll blow away the front of your kisser."

Farquar gloated. "Fine, fine. Just the attitude I desire." He leaned forward earnestly.

"Mr. Fuhr, how would you like to get out of Slobtown? How would you like to live in splendor and wealth all the rest of your miserable life? How would you like to avoid the skirmishes for food and a sleeping-place, have all the women and fine clothes you want?"

Billy thought it sounded like a wild dream. Either the old man was insane, or he had been jamming on hero-coke. It was impossible, that's what it was; the Slobtowners stayed

and lived and died dirty in Slobtown, and the richers played and idled and were cremated ceremonially in Moneyville; and never the twain would meet.

"It sounds lousy, that's how it sounds!" Billy snapped, turning away.

Farquar's brittle tones bit out at him. "Face me when I speak to you, Mr. Fuhr. I dislike rudeness almost as much as I dislike noise."

Billy turned back. There was an odd pleading in the old man's eyes. "Well, it is within your reach, Mr. Fuhr. No matter how much you protest and fight it, I'm sure the idea appeals to you. Consequently, I'm willing to offer you just that; a place here in Moneyville. A title, a home, and all the resources you could ever hope for.

"I'm more than just very wealthy, Fuhr. I'm one of the ruling class of this city. The rich do my bidding. But I now find myself in the hopeless position of having to come to a guttercrawl like you. Now, do we talk business, or do I burn you down? I dislike having to crawl to the likes of you!"

His hand strayed to make the firing motion.

Billy knew he had no choice. The pixie-man named Far-

quar sipped daintily at a plate of *vichysoisse*. From time to time he looked up and cocked his brown little head at Billy Fuhr. "Eat, Mr. Fuhr. Eat. No one can adequately talk business on an empty stomach."

He smiled engagingly, but Billy's mind was too-freshly scarred by the sadistic application of the shield, and he would not give Farquar even the satisfaction of accepting food. He sat solidly in the geometric nightmare, his dark eyes in their pools of shadow steadily watching the man in the high chair. Farquar had too much power. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Though he did not know the saying, the concept was all too clear to William Bonney Fuhr.

Someone would have to do something heavy about the pixie-man. Billy had ample reason to believe he would be the one. If he was ever given the opportunity.

Farquar polished off the soup, wiped his slash mouth with a delicately-laced napkin, and snapped his fingers. The tray on its thin steel shank slid down into the floor and was gone.

"Now," he said, leaning back and folding his wire-thin brown fingers over his in-

drawn belly. "Now. We were about to discuss your employment."

"I haven't said yet that I *want* you to employ me." Billy let the words out with a snarl.

"You have one minute to make up your mind, I'll fool around with your petty pride no longer."

It did not take Billy the entire minute to decide.

"Good," Farquar said. "Now here is my problem. My daughter Roxella—you will find a photoblok of her in the drawer of that table beside you—has disappeared. I know where she is, but I have been unable to get to her."

He paused as Billy palmed open the drawer of the geometric table, and drew out the photoblok. Encased in the prismatic clearness was a three-dimensional figure three inches high. Perhaps the most beautiful woman Billy Fuhr had ever seen. Her hair was long and golden, hanging to her shoulders with that smooth silken quality that makes a man feel it was grown just to be touched. Her body was straight and firm, and her eyes were a sharp, snapping brown that indicated a strong will and sharp intellect.

"She's very beautiful," he mumbled.

Farquar's face darkened,

and his hand strayed in a twitch toward the fire-beams. "*That* is none of your concern, Slobman. She is of no concern to you at all, save that you rescue her. That is what you are here for. And if you have any idea of her that exceeds what I've just said, forget it immediately. If you ever touch her, I'll make certain you die in a way that will make the lightning shield seem like heaven on Earth. Do you understand?"

Billy Fuhr stared silently. He understood, and the idea of the death Farquar outlined made him sick inside. The terrible memory of the shield had still not passed.

Farquar was still not satisfied. His temples jumped as he leaned forward and strained a hoarse, "*Do you understand, Fuhr?*"

"I understand."

"What? I can't hear you. Say it louder, and remember it!"

"I understand, I understand, for God's sake!"

Farquar settled back. He was breathing with difficulty. "She's all I have in this world. She means more to me than my towers or my influence or anything. If she were to come to harm, I would kill myself."

His voice faltered, and a

slim, tight-skinned hand passed across his eyes. "I've had a very trying time the past two months. She was outward bound to Rorak's Nebula on an inspection tour of my mining-interests on Five, Seventeen and Twenty-nine. Somewhere out past the planet Balboa in the Iris VII sector—you know of it? No, how *could* you? You scum barely know our ships ply space still—the liner disappeared. She, and everyone else on board—in fact, the ship itself, vanished. I sent out many—"

"How do you know it vanished?" Billy asked.

Farquar's eyebrows went up. "When a ship sends a transpace distress signal for an hour, and then snaps off in the middle of a code, it is safe to assume they are in trouble. When that ship does not show up the next day at the next port of call, it is safe to assume it is lost. I wouldn't have you here if I wasn't certain it was lost, and that my daughter was in trouble."

Billy nodded.

"I sent out thirty different search-ships. Each of them have sent back a definite distress message, and none of them have returned. But my associates have triangulated the points of origin of the messages, and they place

the distress area somewhere around Balboa. There is obviously something there that is not entirely elemental, and it has my daughter. If you can bring her back, everything I promised you is yours."

Billy sat quite still and thought about it. There was a great future here, if he was to believe what Farquar said. No more grubbing and killing in the filth of Slobtown; the opportunity to enjoy the amenities and pleasures he had been denied all his life. Wealth, ease, position. And then, too, there was Roxella.

"Tell me what you know."

Farquar settled back and told him. It was not much. The liner had gone down—supposedly on Balboa, about which nothing was known—and thirty other ships had followed it.

"How soon can I start?"

"Immediately. Take the tube down. It's set for the labs, where they will outfit you."

Then, as the last words left the pixie-man's mouth, the body jerked, his hands fell limply, and Farquar slipped off the chair. He fell to the floor and lay there, like a de-stringed puppet.

Billy jumped up and went to him. He stooped down and

lifted one hand. It was more than cold: it was flaccid and empty of life. It was the hand of a mannequin.

From nowhere and everywhere in the room, the voice of Farquar, deeper than before, rapped out. "You didn't think I'd trust myself in the same room with a guttercrawl like you, did you?"

Billy's jaw muscles leaped, and he slammed the doll's hand back to the floor. He stood up and viciously kicked at the dummy. Farquar's laughter was a live thing in the room.

"By the way, Mr. Fuhr," the nowhere-everywhere voice jibed, "how *did* Billy the Kid die? Shot in the back?"

Billy turned and sneered. "I don't know."

The tube carried him softly, swiftly, downstairs.

Billy took a plop to sleep away the trip to the Iris VII sector. The plop-cap went down heavily, and lay in the pit of his stomach for a long time; long after he had cut grav on the ship and fallen asleep hanging in mid-air, in his padded cabin.

Farquar had been as good as his word. The labs downstairs in the tower had been more than prepared. They had stripped him out of his soggy

vest and stripped-cloth rags, and bathed him completely. When they had released him from the needle-baths, he felt more eased and agile than he had in many months. Then they wheeled him into a surgery lab, and when he had seen the bright, needled instruments, had tried to get off the rolling table. Three lab-men had held him down, and chocked the table in place. Straps had then been fastened, and the lab-men had spoken softly to him, assuring him nothing damaging was being done. Then one of the many-pronged instruments descended, a needle entered his bicep, and he was cold in an instant.

When he had come to, nothing seemed different. The straps had been removed, and he felt just fine. Then they had shown him the extent of their surgery: a flap of skin had been removed; the mass of veins, cartilage, nerve fiber and arteries had been moved aside and compressed, and a semi-circular piece of some non-metallic substance inserted. In the trough of the piece, they had laid a deadly thousand-shot stinger, with its trigger on safety. Then they had laid the skin flap back—it was now some sort of pseudo-flesh—and Billy had watched it suck itself back into place

without a break. There was no way of telling he carried a lethal weapon on his person. The labmen had told him the gun was entirely made of scan-proof plastics with printed circuits and gelatin charges ... it would escape any sort of detecting devices.

At the same time, while Billy had been under sedation, the conditioning had gone in, and now, as they asked him test questions, he found he could pilot a spaceship with ease: Vectors, charge-velocities, trajectories, power-potentials, force-equivalents, astrogation — everything was deeply implanted.

Then he had been clothed, and driven out to the spaceport.

At the port he had been loaded aboard a sleek, small inverspace ship with the name *Iowa Farquar* on its prow. The comp charts had gone with him, and he had noted—from his new fund of information—that they were already checked, punched and triple-coded with settings for Iris VII's sector, and sub-coded for Balboa.

Then the blast-off, and now he hung sleeping, turning slowly with every directional breeze from the air-cleansing units. From time to time he would bump a wall and mutter

in his rest, but his dark brown hair hung out in all directions wildly, and his close-rigged mesh-suit bunched only where it was loose about biceps and ankles. He slept on as the ship plunged through inverspace, cutting across the light-years as though they were non-existent.

From time to time, Moneyville newsfax sheets had been smuggled into Slobtown; there had been an occasional book, also, with imperfectly reproduced two-D photos of several planets. But from memory Billy could not recall ever having seen a planet as strange as Balboa.

The huge view-ball that hung above the course-comp glowed brightly. In its depths, on its surface, the image of space deep and crowded with stars was subservient to the bloated yellow face of Balboa.

The *Iowa Farquar* banked sharply on its course trajectory, and spun down toward the planet. Billy had long since turned on the artificial gravity, and the ship slipped down with ease and assurance.

Billy stared at the image of Balboa, marveling.

It was like a bald man, with a few stringers of hair combed over the empty areas with

care. Running from pole to pole, in broken lines, were heavily-forested and tilled sections. They were of various colors—brown, green, dark-red; yellow—as though whatever crops had been planted there, or whatever vegetation grew there, had been specially selected so that no two were the same. And in between the planted strips, the planet was flat, lustreless yellow, featureless, without body of water or mountain or even plain. Flat and solid deep-yellow, like a seamless basketball. Almost as though Balboa were some artificial satellite on which vegetation had been placed as an afterthought . . .

The ship veered off-orbit. Billy felt the *Iowa Farquar* skitter and drag back, fighting the new pull on its body. He cast a frightened glance at the dial banks, and saw that gravity had gripped the ship, that the automatic reverse tubes had cut in to buck it, and *were doing no good!*

The altimeter spun crazily, and the ship heeled as it was pulled down. Billy realized at once that whatever had happened to the space liner on which Roxella Farquar had been traveling, whatever had taken the thirty investigating ships, was now happening to him.

The bulk of Balboa swam up rapidly in the view-globe.

Billy kept careful watch on the telemetering devices and was relieved to see that whatever he was getting into would at least be on a world with Earth-normal gravity, atmosphere and safe spore content. He went back amidships and slipped into an armored suit, one of those used for high-target work with acetylene-tubes and hard radiation bricks. He undogged one of the seam-locks on the suit, and swung away the right hand glove, leaving his right arm revealed from the wrist down.

Then he got out the .72 from the locker. Using the manipulative devices on the left hand steel glove of the armor-suit, he checked the safety, the breech, the gelatin charge chamber and the range mechanism.

He laid it aside, and took the .375 Magnum down from its clips in the locker. He loaded an extra palm-box. He slung the rifle over his shoulder, fastening it there with a hook from the suit.

He was stumping his way heavilyfootedly in the armor-suit, back up to the control room, when the tubes blew. He heard a warning sizzle and then a popping, which his implanted knowledge warned

him was the first stress-noise from arearships. Then there was a screech and a scream, and flying metal thundered through the ship, whizzing about like shrapnel, smashing the bulkheads, spanging off the deckplates, crushing the equipment with wild trajectories. He was caught on the head and back by two large pieces of tube-metal, and went down in a clanking heap.

It was probably all that saved his life.

Billy lay there shaking, listening to the unbelievable sounds of the tube parts spanging into the control room, the delicate tinkle of shattering machines and breaking tubes. He heard the majestic view-globe exploding, and bits of plasticene came ripping in from the other direction.

The roaring and shattering did not stop till every tube was gone, and the ship was ripped open from snout to tail.

He lay there in the armor-suit and stared out at the deepening blue of the Balboan sky.

The ship continued to fall. Whatever they were using on it was independent of the tubes and had put so much strain on the power-cylinders that they had exploded. Me-

chanical frustration and insanity.

But whatever it was, it was a foolproof method of making sure a ship never got away again. So this was what had happened to the thirty search-ships.

Billy Fuhr doubted very much that he would find many of the Earthmen still alive down there on Balboa.

He only hoped Roxella Farquar had been nowhere near the line of flight of the liner's tubes. All that womanflesh wasted, would be a great loss to humanity.

And himself.

The ship continued to fall.

The first robot got to the ship just as Billy stumbled free of the wreckage. The power that had blown the tubes had reversed as the ship came in, indicating that they did not want to kill him—and that the tube-explosion had perhaps been an accident. It had not reversed quickly enough, however; and the *Iowa Farquar* had come in pretty solidly. Solidly enough to throw Billy half across the ship, and leave the *Iowa Farquar* a tumbled heap of wreckage.

The ship came down in the middle of a planted strip of deep blue, and Billy tumbled

down the rest of the corridor inside the ship. He slammed against the bulkhead, and managed to trip the release on the port. The plug swung open, then gathered momentum and clanged against the outer hull of the ship.

Billy staggered to his feet, and climbed down the ladder—at a weird angle—jumping the last two feet to the blue soil. It *was* blue. Blue stalks of some wheat-like grain rose almost to his knees, but the soil itself was of a deeply blued hue.

He had only a moment to look at it, however, because the glint of metal in the sun came to him through the face-circle of the armor helmet. He turned halfway around, slowly, cautiously . . .

The robot stood almost seven feet high, with a head that was rounded and set upon a wide triangular torso. A sort of carburetor-looking affair separated the torso and the horizontal tube of its lower half. Two spindly, jointed legs came off the cannister of the lower torso, ending in gripper feet. The arms were similarly formed and jointed, and in his metallic fingers, the robot carried some sort of deadly-seeming rifle. But the thing which stopped Billy was not the single tubular reflection plate set

in the center of the huge head; it was the *wavery*.

That was the only way he could think of it. Like a huge gong, being hit again and again, over and over, at spaced intervals. Billy remembered once when he had picked up a slug from a looter in Slobtown, and had been operated upon, under ether. While he was under sedation, someone had spoken his name, and he had heard it as though it were echoing forever and ever, down and down a long, enormously long, high-vaulted corridor, over and over and over . . .

That was what the wavery was like. As though a beam transmitter were sending out circular signal waves every few seconds.

From the semi-circular antenna attached to the robot's audio cannisters, on either side of the head, the wavery seemed to spread outward like ripples in a pond.

It was subtly terrifying.

As though the robot were being operated by some unseen force—implacable, untouchable, impregnable, and ever watching—directing the machine to do its bidding.

The robot walked with a loose-jointed, loping movement; awkward but remark-

ably swift and sure-footed. Even as he stared in dumb belief at this coolly stalking metal man, the robot swung its weapon out on Billy. He felt the same ingrained pangs of instantaneous fear he got every time he was in a duel. The .375 Magnum came off his shoulder, and was leveled at the robot. "Stop!" he called.

The robot kept coming, implacably.

The first beam Billy got off missed the robot by a scant fraction of an inch, tearing over the thing's right shoulder, leaving a smear like oxidized metal. The metal man did not seem to notice.

The next burst caught it dead-center, and ripped away half its huge torso. It faltered, and stumbled, as though it had lost its equilibrium. But it kept coming.

The third beam took it high in the head, tore through, and sprayed shards of metal every which way.

The thing halted and fell over on its side, still clutching the rifle. The wavery died off softly, with a decreasing volume, till it was a fly's-wing whisper.

Then silence.

For a minute, until the throbbing started in Billy's head. He had started across the field, making each step a

cautious one, with the rifle swung down into fire position, and abruptly the throbbing started up from the soil and the stalks of plants, and the heavy cleated metal boots of the suit, and then his legs, and then his thighs, and then his stomach, and then his head was beating with the over-and-over beat of it.

The same beat as the wavery of the robot, but deeper, as though the very gut of the planet stormed up at him. Beat. Beat. Beat.

Billy felt it threading in and out of his brain. Then it burst with full fury, and his mind exploded into a billion little red wet squirming segments. He felt his legs go out from under him. The rifle dropped from his limp hands.

Pain flamed and drove at him furiously; he toppled as the metal man had toppled, and lay wriggling in a semi-conscious state. Then insanity blackness closed over him as he realized the ground had opened and he was dropping like a plummet weight.

Straight to the center of the planet.

There was a goddess standing over him when he staggered out of the kingdom of the blind. She was unbelievably sweet and beautiful. It was

fantastic that so much loveliness could emerge from so much pain and agony. Billy tried to force his eyes to unfog. The film passed from them and he saw her clearly. Her hair was long and golden, hanging to her shoulders with that smooth silken quality that makes a man feel it was grown just to be touched. Her body was straight and firm, and her eyes were a sharp snapping brown that indicated a strong will and sharp intellect.

There were lines of great pain and suffering among the even contours of her features. Whatever had happened to her here on Balboa, had changed her not much outside—but greatly inside. Still, she was the same woman from the photoblok in the pixie-man's tower.

"Roxella F-Farquar?" he stammered.

An expression of complete disbelief, complete bewilderment, passed over her full lips, her sensitive eyes. "You know me. The Heart called me from my field, told me you were thinking of me. Told me to be here when you awakened. Is that true?"

Billy shook his head to clear the fog, and slapped a hand to his hip. No gun. "Is . . . *what* true?"

Her mouth drew down into a half-pout. "Is it true you were thinking of me?"

He nodded his head slowly. It hurt. "Could be. Yeah, I probably was, I guess. But how did *you* know?"

"I just *told* you. The Heart called me and *said* you were thinking of me. It must have extracted the thought from you; it's strange, but I know the Heart can read our minds, yet it seldom bothers. I wonder why that is? Do you know?"

Billy slid his feet off the hard slab on which he had been lying. The feet did not touch the floor, and his hands felt greasy. He looked down and saw they were covered with oil; the slab was covered with oil.

She caught his glance, said, "Oh, this was the only place the Heart had to put you, I guess. It's a robot repair shelf. Don't mind the grease, it'll work off in the sunshine."

Billy stood down, and fell back against the table, clutching his head. He felt as though his brains were subtly scrambled. "Lady, I haven't got the damndest idea what in blazes you're talking about. Where *am* I?"

"Balboa," she replied coolly, leaning against an intricate piece of blocky machinery.

"I *know* that," he cried, "I landed here! But where on Balboa?"

Her eyes opened wider. "You don't know, do you? You actually don't know. What are you doing here?"

He looked toward the unseen sky, and said very carefully, "Your father sent me, Miss Farquar. After dragging me from my home, calling me a guttercrawl . . ."

She inserted quickly, with a pooh-poohing attitude, "Oh, don't mind old B.F. He has a pretty small-minded view of Slobtowners. I can see how he developed it, of course, but then—"

"As I was *saying*," Billy cut in angrily, "after calling me a guttercrawl, sizzling me with blue lightning and threatening me with ashes if I didn't come after you, I was joyful to trot out here. Now I'm here, and my ship gets dragged down, smashed up, a clanking tin can with eyeballs comes after me, and when I burn it good, I'm mind-blasted.

"*Now*: where in the bloody hell *am* I?"

"Okay, okay, take it easy. I'll tell you. Balboa was once a research planet for some race or other. Somewhere along the line the race got itself killed off, but not before it had

started to build this gigantic robot brain in the center of the planet, to fight their wars and run their factories, and so on. That was a long, long time ago."

"How long?"

"From what I can gather talking to the Heart, perhaps thirty or forty million years ago. But at any rate, the race was killed off, and the brain was left unfinished. However, it had a self-repairing ability—utilizing those servo-robots you met on the surface—and it went ahead building itself. But it didn't work along the same lines as the race that had begun its construction, and in about a thousand years it had built itself so that it filled the entire center of the planet. It now fills this planet to almost five miles below the surface."

"You mean this entire world—Balboa—is a big computer, with a soil-skin around it, and seven-foot robots running around on top to take care of it?"

She nodded. "That's right. For thirty, forty-some thousand years, the thing just lay here—not knowing what to do with itself. Then, along came an Earth-ship a few hundred years ago, and landed here. From the minds of the Earth-men, the brains found out

about 'conquest' and 'desires' and 'wealth' and everything else we are heir to. So it realized it had a great potential, and it did not kill the Earthmen—it studied them—reading their minds from time to time, to gather more emotional information, to use on the day the brain invades the galaxy."

Billy snuffed, "Impossible! Fantastic! You're out of your mind, that crash must have shaken loose *your* bolts."

Roxella Farquar drew herself up. A haughty expression filtered across her face. "Listen, Mister, if the Heart had not ordered me here, I would not be here, so don't insult me."

"What's the Heart?" Billy asked, mollified slightly.

"The brain."

"So if it's a brain, why does it call itself the Heart?"

She was getting angrier by the second. "How the hell do I know? That's what it calls itself, that's what *I* call it, and that's what *everybody* left here calls it, mostly because if we don't, it'll burn us to death. Clear?"

Billy said, "Clear," with obvious unhappiness, and asked her to tell him the rest, if there *was* any more.

"Well," she continued, "the Heart wants all the data it can

glean from human minds, and it's been capturing as many Earth ships as come this way, which isn't many.—We're pretty far off you know. Only a contra-terrene cloud that passed our path could have shaken us from the liner's regular route and brought us near enough for the brain's draw-power to pull us in.

"But the Heart doesn't just want anybody. It wants only Earthmen with clever minds, because those are the ones from which it can get the clearest, truest emotions, and insights on humanity. That will all come in handy when it strikes . . . maybe in another three thousand years."

"It sure takes its time, doesn't it?" Billy said snidely.

"Takes its time," she replied, "but it can't fail."

"So how does it tell who are the smart ones?"

"You'll find out," she smiled.

"What does it do with the dumb ones?"

"You'll find *that* out, too."

"You really like playing games, don't you?" Billy asked, trying to conceal his interest in the girl.

"Listen, Mister . . ."

"The name is Fuhr. William Bonney Fuhr. From Slobtown."

Her tone changed, and she

forgot to complete her previous sentence. "You don't talk like a Slobtowneer."

"Oh? How is that? How are we *supposed* to sound?"

She stumbled and fumbled and blushed, and had difficulty getting out her thoughts. Billy cut her off.

"Books and reading, Miss Farquar. That's all; just a few of the things you take for granted, can clear away a great many of the rough edges we pick up fighting for bread and bed in Slobtown. A little bit of self-education."

She lowered her eyes, softly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Forget it. You were saying . . ."

She looked up. "Yes, well, the reason I may seem so flip-pant is that there just isn't any hope. The Heart rules the planet, knows everything that happens, and has its robot arms to take care of any trouble. And even if there *was* some way to escape the Heart, the suck-power is on, and nothing could get off-planet. So we're doomed to spend the rest of our days here, letting the Heart pluck out what it wants to know, whenever it wants to call us for hearing."

"How often is that?" Billy asked.

"Oh, I've been down here

ten or twelve times, I suppose."

"Well . . . what do you plan to do, spend the rest of your life here? And, say, if the Heart rules the planet, what's it got grain and such out there for? It doesn't need food does it?"

She looked thoughtful, then answered, "The second question first. It's got grain and such growing there because it's *always* had it there, and it sees no reason why it *shouldn't* grow there. The robots tend most of it, but to keep us humans busy, the Heart makes us cultivate and tend strips. Keeps us out of mischief . . . not that we could get into any. We're even put in separate force-cells each night. And the other question. I intend to do nothing."

Billy shook his head in wonder. "That's pretty damned fatalistic, isn't it?"

She spread her hands in hopelessness. "What is there to do? You have any ideas?"

Billy had quite a few—not all of which were concerned with getting off Balboa—but the most important question was, "Are there any ships here that work?"

She nodded. "Several. In the graveyard. Where we buried the ones the Heart could not

use. The Heart used them to understand inverspace mechanisms, then just let them lay. Whether they'll work or not is another problem."

"Good," Billy said, "then here's what we'll do. I'll—"

The mental voice cut him off sharply.

"That will be all, Billy Fuhr. I want you now."

Billy's face drew up in shock. The voice was cold, hard, inflexible as steel, and he knew without a doubt where it had its source. The Heart had called.

"It spoke to you, didn't it?" Roxella said, her brow furrowing, and a clasped fear in her eyes.

"Did you hear it, too?" She shook her head fearfully. "No, but I can tell the expression by now. We all look the same. It's peculiar. You'd better go."

"Where?"

"Follow the pattern of orange lights."

A bright intricacy of orange, phosphorescent and shimmering, had appeared on the wall near the door. "What is this?" Billy wanted to know.

She shook her head again, this time in resignation. "It's your test. If you're smart enough, you live out your days on Balboa..."

The mental voice cut through again: "Now, Fuhr!"

Billy started toward the door, and it opened for him. He heard Roxella Farquar finish the sentence, just before the door slid shut behind him: "—if you're not, you'll die in the center of this planet."

He was alone, and he followed the orange lights on the walls. Down, down, down, into the gut of the planet. A world that was a mere shell over a gigantic thinking machine.

A machine he had to beat at its own tests.

"I'm waiting, Fuhr," the Heart spoke in his brain.

"You're quite the little steel Napoleon, aren't you?" Billy gibed aloud, but a stinger of pain up his right side silenced him.

The Heart had everything its way.

Was he smart enough? He didn't know.

The Heart was gigantic. More than that. Gigantic was a word to be used on commonplace things like mountains and palaces and seven-foot robots. This was something else. As far above him as he could see, the banks of glittering, dial-encrusted computing structures stretched. Not for feet, but for miles. Straight

up into the inner section of the planet. And probably as far beneath him as above. The room was merely a hollow, circular area in the middle of the brain.

A dull pulsing throb went through the room steadily. It was the same beat as the robots aboveground had had. Beat, beat, beat as the signals went out like ripples in a pool of water. Billy's mind was a welter of mixed thoughts; he had been thinking about something before he came down here—something about a weapon, but that thought was gone. Gone.

What Billy did not know was that the psychmen in Farquar's labs had done an excellent job of implanting. They had keyed in his thoughts so that whenever he thought of the gun hidden in his arm, the thoughts would not clear. They would be deflected. Every time, that is, but the times of extreme pressure, extreme danger, when it was a total necessity; then he could think of it, then he could use it.

Billy walked forward, and the sound of his boots on the steel floorplates rang back with hollow authority. In every corner of the cornerless room lights flickered and

danced and marched in steady progressions across the computer faces. Green snakelike lines wriggled over the calibrated screen of an oscillograph, and the bleet-bleet-bleet-bleet of a waveform signal mechanism kept steady accompaniment to the almost soundless beating of the wavery.

"You are easily impressed," the Heart said.

"You're nuts!" Billy replied. If he was going to be struck dead, at least he would die having said what he wanted to say.

Strangely, the Heart's tones changed. Not in pitch, for it was a completely mechanical voice, but somehow in the spacing and use of the words, it was apparent the machine had been insulted.

"No need to get sarcastic," it said.

And somehow, that sentence made Billy Fuhr's mind change about this great, hulking machine in the gut of a world. There was something definitely childlike about it—in the way it took offense—and now that he thought of it, in the way it domineered—the same way a child would domineer its parents if it should suddenly become twenty feet tall. Was it possible that even forty million years was not

enough to bring a computer this size out of the adolescent stage?

"I'm not reading your thoughts, you know," the Heart said. And now Billy no longer read the tones of a cruel, insensitive Napoleon into its words; now he heard the slightly pleading, trying-to-make-an-impression, ready-to-destroy-if-angered-or-frustrated voice of a child.

"Thank you," Billy answered.

"I have a test for you, you know," the Heart said, somewhat anxiously, and (Billy thought) somewhat happily.

"Fine. Glad to try it," Billy said.

"Good. Good. I'm sure we'll get along. You're a very pleasant one. Most of them were unpleasant, or thought I was stupid. A few didn't, like that girl you were thinking about. She's been the nicest so far. She isn't made to work as hard as the others."

"Do you think you can pass the test? I'd hate to have to burn you down."

Billy swallowed with difficulty. "I sure hope I can. You're pretty big, aren't you?"

"I sure am. Forty-eight thousand miles of steel plate. Over three billion miles of coil

and wire. I'm big all right. You noticed that."

Billy warmed talking to the Heart. "I guess you're the biggest robot brain I've ever seen."

"I guess so," said the Heart laconically, as though being big wasn't everything. "But it gets lonesome. The robots aboveground aren't much to talk to, you know." Then, as though he hated to cut off the pleasant conversation, the Heart changed the subject. "Well, we'd better get to the test."

"You'll have three chances to solve this one."

A tiny plug-port in one bank opened, and a metallic arm—ball-jointed in a dozen places—slid out. There were five metal fingers at the end of the hand, and as Billy watched, the hand made a fist, with the forefinger extended.

"Now," said the Heart, "I am going to say and do something, and if you can repeat it exactly, you can live. If you don't repeat it exactly, again *exactly*, then you will die, I'm afraid."

"That's the test?"

"That's right. Ready?" Billy nodded.

The Heart cleared its banks...

Chatter, chatter, chatter, clickclickclickclickclick!

Then, as the hand moved, the voice said: "A human's face is round (the forefinger traced a circle counter-clockwise in the air), has two eyes (the hand jabbed twice, where eyes would be in the circle), a nose (it jabbed once), and a mouth (the forefinger drew a curving, smiling line under the nose-jab in the invisible circle). Now, repeat it."

Billy thought for a moment. "Is that *all*?"

The Heart grew steely once more. "Repeat it *exactly*."

Billy had remembered the direction each time, and he began, "A human's face is round, has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth," drawing the face precisely as the robot had done.

"Okay?" Billy asked, knowing he had done it right.

"No," the Heart answered. "That is the first time. I will repeat."

Billy felt his stomach heave. What had he done wrong? Was it a trick of some sort? It seemed all too simple, too childish. Did it have the inevitable subtle trickery of the childlike game inherent in it?

He watched as the Heart traced the pattern again, said the phrase again.

Chatter, chatter, chatter, clickclickclickclickclick!

Banks cleared, the Heart

repeated the words and maneuvers exactly as before, and this time Billy saw it *was* the same as before . . . no difference. So the inaccuracy was elsewhere. Not in the hand-movement.

He recalled the words, and tried a second time: "A human's face is round, has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth." His forefinger drew the face again perfectly.

"Wrong," said the Heart. This is the third and last time. If you don't repeat it *exactly*, I'll have to turn the batteries on you. I'm sorry. So few ever succeed at my tests. Do you think they're too hard?"

Billy did not answer.

The Heart cleared its banks with a

Chatter, chatter, chatter, clickclickclickclickclick!

And then it repeated the human's face is round, has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth once more.

Billy thought, and thought, and his mind whirled. Whatever it was, it would not be obvious. It would be something he would not notice, something ordinary that would not attract his attention. Something like . . .

"Of course!" he cried.

Now what was the human equivalent of clearing banks

with a *chatter, chatter, chatter, clickclickclickclickclick-click!*

Billy cleared his throat loudly, and repeated the motion words as he had both other times.

"That's *right!*" the Heart exulted. "Oh, good, good, now you can live, and we'll have many chats together, and I won't read your mind unless I'm trying to find something out. Now you can go above-ground, and one of my robots will find you a field to till.

"Good-bye . . ."

"So long," said Billy, walking back along the trail of orange phosphorescence, and not feeling frightened or angry toward the Heart at all. After all it was only a big, overgrown metal-headed kid.

He went back up the ramps for what seemed hours, and a robot met him—rifle ready—and escorted him to another kind of droptube that dragged him upward from the center of Balboa. In a half hour, the light of the three suns warmed him, and the wildly rioting colors of Balboa's surface assaulted his eyes.

He saw Roxella Farquar heading out toward her field, and he called to her. As her robot walked her away, she turned and saw him, and his heart bubbled inside him as

she gave a little smile, and a wave of her hand.

He went to his field, whistling.

Mentally getting ready for the breakaway from Balboa.

Five months is a long, long time, when you spend your days working under the glare of three suns, and your nights in a wall-less cell of energy, separating you from the ten other humans who share your fate. But there are things that make the days less long:

The time you find a rusty file, dropped by a robot mechanic.

The day they take away your arm-chains.

The day you try to slug a robot who works you too fast.

The day they attach the wrist-chains again.

The day you decide to break and free yourself.

Billy Fuhr had worked under pressure for five months. Slowly it had built; at first he hadn't minded too much. It was odd. It wasn't the kind of life he wanted, but he didn't really feel like losing his life making a break. But the tension and the agony built like a wall, stone-by-stone.

Then one day, the blocks broke down in his mind, the implanted disregard of the

weapon in his arm sifted away, and he recalled he had a weapon.

He was in the field. His clothes were rags by now, and the only thing bright and shiny were the manacles and the length of rigid chain between his hands.

Off beyond him he could see one of the humans—a man named Fairsmith who had been there for twenty years—seeding his strip of land with a soil-box. He watched the man for a minute, shaking the box to allow the seeds to spill from the grating at the bottom. He watched the man's robot, standing nearby, rifle at the ready; then he stared at his own.

"Work," said the robot stolidly. It was one of the ten or twelve words Billy had been able to get from the machine. Unlike the Heart, who had many long talks with him, this reflection-faced imbecile only urged him to work more.

Was this the kind of life he wanted?

He had to get away now!

The barriers fell . . .

. . . he remembered the operation, the false skin, the gun.

The file had been buried weeks before in the field. He had carefully avoided thinking about it when he was in

the presence of the Heart, down in the center of the planet. Now he carried his hoe a few feet, and began digging steadily, pretending to loosen the soil. In a few moments he had turned up the rusty file, and he turned away from the robot, not bothering with the manacles and chain.

It was that pseudo-flesh he wanted to file away.

He began rasping the dirty, soil-clogged file across his forearm. In a few moments the flesh began to rasp away. The robot grew suspicious.

"Work! Work!" it said loudly, and began to walk forward, its rifle ready to swing down into firing position. The *wavery* got stronger. It was, perhaps, communicating with the Heart. Billy knew this was the time; now or never! He had to hurry. He couldn't move fast enough.

Like ripples in a pool the *wavery* went out stronger and stronger.

Billy filed and scraped, and a second later the flesh peeled back—and there it was.

The deadly thousand-shot stinger.

He ripped the gun from his arm, and in the same motion shoved the flap of pseudo-skin back. It sucked into place without a seam, and he turned

on the robot as it came up behind him.

"Five months," Billy spat, and shot the robot in the big, glowing reflection tube. The robot keeled over, and then Billy aimed at a separating link of the chains. It went with a sizzle and a flow of slagged metal, and his hands were free.

Fairsmith's robot gave him as little trouble.

Then there were two of them.

In a few minutes all ten of the humans were free, and racing for the graveyard of downed ships. But Billy's mind rejected the idea that the Heart did not know what was going on. When each robot was receiving its *wavery* signals from that central source, it was impossible to suspect that the giant robot brain did not know what had happened.

He clung to Roxella Farquar's hand, and dragged her across the fields to the ships. One of them was still quite intact, and they climbed inside, dogging the ports, and running up the ramps to the control room.

In his head, Billy felt the *wavery* getting stronger on the planet.

Luck remained with them—or perhaps it was *not* luck—

for the ship throbbed as the drive rods were cut in, and a moment later the big ship roared away from Balboa.

They were far outside the orbit of Balboa, careening between the two largest suns with reflection-shields at full-strength, when the call came into Billy's mind.

"Good-bye. There will be others. And I really had no further need of any of you. The day will come soon."

Each of them turned. "Did you hear it?" Roxella asked nervously.

Billy nodded, and the others sagged. Were they going to be killed in space? But nothing happened. The *wavery* died out, and they were alone for the first time in a long while.

Billy slumped into a dusty saddle-seat. "It *wanted* us to escape. That's why this ship works; that's why my blasting the robots was so simple. That's why the suck-power was turned off.

"The Heart isn't really such a bad sort. Even a vengeful kid doesn't want its playthings unhappy. As long as it'll take the Heart maybe another billion years to start the invasion of the galaxy, it saw no reason why we couldn't live out our lives in peace and happiness.

"I feel sort of sorry for it."

They agreed in their own ways, and each went to find what he sought on the ship. Rest, or food-paks, or a radio, or a view of the stars before they snapped into inverspace.

Roxella stayed with Billy in the control room.

"What are you going to do when we get back?" she said, and there was more than interest in her voice. Billy felt a strong attachment for this girl, who was not cut from the same mold as her father.

"Your dad promised me a life of wealth and ease in Moneyville. Should I accept?"

She shrugged her shoulders with an eloquent show of unconcern. "It's up to you. Did you see many of the men in Moneyville?"

"No, I was brought in a sealed trundler. The only one I was was your father."

She pursed her lips. "Dad's an exception," she said, with a tinge of bitterness. "He got wizened with his own nastiness. But the rest . . .

"The rest, they're all fat and sluggish. Moneyville does that to you. When you've got everything you want, when there's nothing to work for, you finally get soft.

"Power corrupts," she began.

"And absolute power corrupts absolutely," he finished.

"I see what you mean."

"So you can do what you want. It's a free world."

Billy thought of the life behind him in Slobtown. Of grubbing and filth and killing and the cheap, low, low, low feel of it all. "Is it a free world?"

She looked at him strangely, and then lowered her eyes. "I see what you mean."

"But," he concluded sadly, then spread his hands, "I'm still boxed in. If I take what he offers, I'll—I'll never be able to see you. I'm afraid your father doesn't take well to a gunman from Slobtown. And if I refuse, it's either a beam in my head, or back to Slobtown."

They stared at each other silently for a long moment, a silence that was an eternity hanging between them black and ever-long as Forever.

The ship snapped into inverspace. The trip to Earth was well on its way.

Behind them, on a planet that was not a planet, but merely a husk housing a forty-billion-year-old brain of fantastic power, the winds played silently where they had tread. Silently forever.

The room was as loud and glaring as before, and this

time the pixie-man was not in his high chair. He chuckled and capered and bumbled about the room, hugging and kissing his daughter, pumping Billy's arm, calling him a saviour and a great man and the recipient of all the wonders that could be bestowed by the Farquar domain.

Then they sat down and Billy told him about the Heart. "Hmmm," Farquar mused. "That brain might be the source of a great deal of power."

Billy saw a strange parallel between the steel Napoleon back there on Balboa, and this power-mad little man before him, and he knew now was the time to pull his card.

"The Heart is going to be left alone," he said succinctly.

Farquar looked up, startled. Then his anger rose. "Don't talk to me that way. I'm the one man you *can't*..."

"I *can* and I *will*," Billy said, and as Farquar's hand moved to make the beam-motion, the thousand-shot stinger came out, pointed at his head.

"Now read me, and read me straight, Farquar," Billy said. "That Heart can be the source of a great deal of good. It's not a bad sort, really, just like a kid with no proper training. It gets off in a wrong direc-

tion; like me. But the Heart is going to have a chance. There's going to be a 'Keep Off' sign posted on it, and maybe in a billion years when it's ready to come off-planet and see what the rest of the Universe is like, we'll be ready to help it, not fight it.

"Furthermore," Billy continued, before Farquar could register a pompous objection, "I am not settling here in Moneyville. I'm marrying Roxella, and we're going to live in Slobtown..."

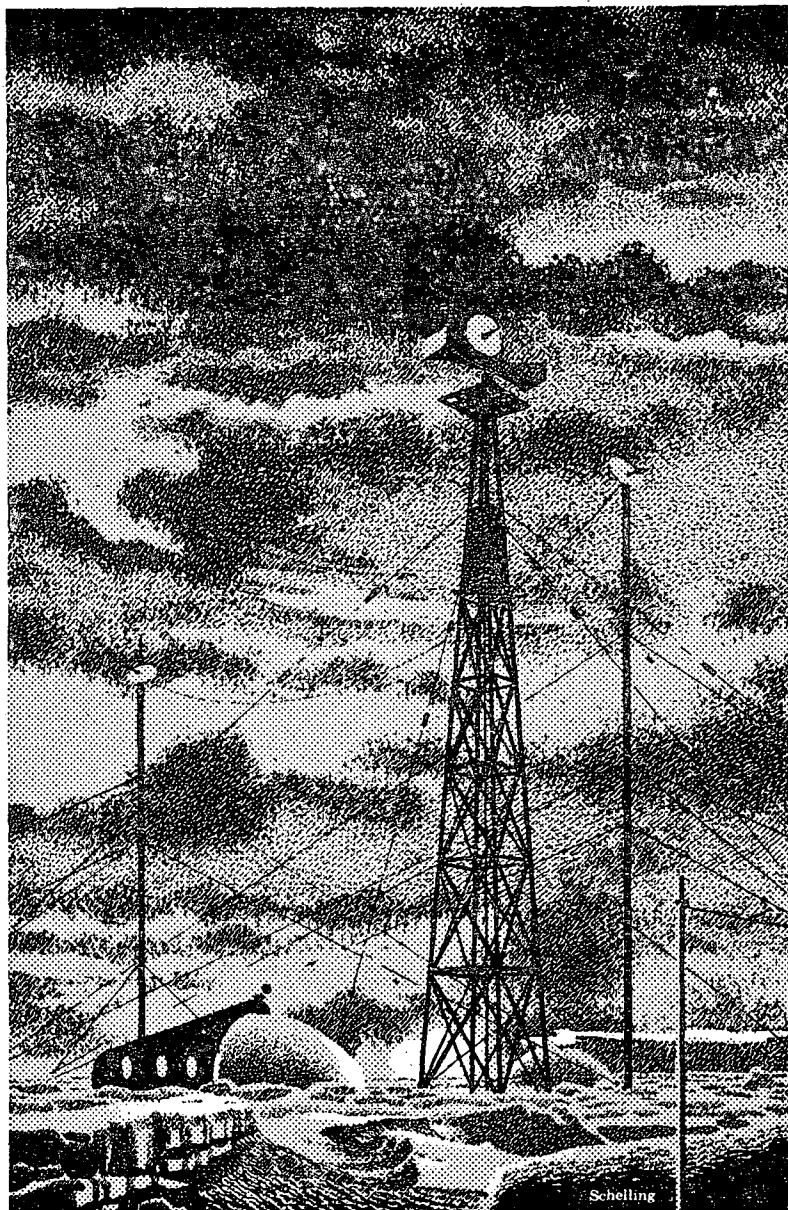
"The hell you are!" Farquar screamed, half-rising. Roxella pushed him gently into his seat once more, and the old man looked up at her in wonder and sorrow. "Not—you—too."

She nodded, said, "Listen to Billy."

"I'm marrying Roxella," Billy went on, "and we're going to put your wealth to good use. We're going to clear up Slobtown, and get the people out there educated. Then we're going to lower the force-barrier, and maybe when the Heart comes to us, we'll be well enough adjusted to help it find a path of mutual reward. Now do you understand?"

"I'll kill you," Farquar said.

"Perhaps so," Roxella cut



Schelling

Answer, Please Answer

By BEN BOVA

Illustrated by SCHELLING

Astronomer Bova draws upon the facts of his field to weave a story that will grip your emotions and tantalize your mind—long after you have finished reading it.

WE had been at the South Pole a week. The outside thermometer read fifty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. The winter was just beginning.

"What do you think we should transmit to McMurdo?" I asked Rizzo.

He put down his magazine and half-sat up in his bunk. For a moment there was silence, except for the nearly inaudible hum of the machinery that jammed our tiny dome, and the muffled shrieking of the ever-present wind, above us.

Rizzo looked at the semi-circle of control consoles, computers,

and meteorological sensors with an expression of disgust that could be produced only by a drafted soldier.

"Tell 'em it's cold, it's gonna get colder, and we've both got appendicitis and need replacements immediately."

"Very clever," I said, and started touching the buttons that would automatically transmit the sensors' memory tapes.

Rizzo sagged back into his bunk. "Why?" He asked the curved ceiling of our cramped quarters. "Why me? Why here? What did I ever do to deserve spending the whole goddammed

winter at the goddammed South Pole?"

"It's strictly impersonal," I assured him. "Some bright young meteorologist back in Washington has convinced the Pentagon that the South Pole is the key to the world's weather patterns. So here we are."

"It doesn't make sense," Rizzo continued, unhearing. His dark, broad-boned face was a picture of wronged humanity. "Everybody knows that when the missiles start flying, they'll be coming over the North Pole. . . . The goddammed Army is a hundred and eighty degrees off base."

"That's about normal for the Army, isn't it?" I was a drafted soldier, too.

Rizzo swung out of the bunk and paced across the dimly-lit room. It only took a half-dozen paces; the dome was small and most of it was devoted to machinery.

"Don't start acting like a caged lion," I warned. "It's going to be a long winter."

"Yeah, guess so." He sat down next to me at the radio console and pulled a pack of cigarets from his shirt pocket. He offered one to me, and we both smoked in silence for a minute or two.

"Got anything to read?"

I grinned. "Some microspool catalogues of stars."

"Stars?"

"I'm an astronomer . . . at

least, I was an astronomer, before the National Emergency was proclaimed."

Rizzo looked puzzled. "But I never heard of you."

"Why should you?"

"I'm an astronomer too."

"I thought you were an electronicist."

He pumped his head up and down. "Yeah . . . at the radio astronomy observatory at Greenbelt. Project OZMA. Where do you work?"

"Lick Observatory . . . with the 120-inch reflector."

"Oh . . . an *optical* astronomer."

"Certainly."

"You're the first optical man I've met." He looked at me a trifle queerly.

I shrugged. "Well, we've been around a few millenia longer than you static-scanners."

"Yeah, guess so."

I DIDN'T realize that Project OZMA was still going on. Have you had any results yet?"

It was Rizzo's turn to shrug. "Nothing yet. The project has been shelved for the duration of the emergency, of course. If there's no war, and the dish doesn't get bombed out, we'll try again."

"Still listening to the same two stars?"

"Yeah . . . Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani. They're the only

two Sun-type stars within reasonable range that might have planets like Earth."

"And you expect to pick up radio signals from an intelligent race."

"Hope to."

I flicked the ash off my cigarette. "You know, it always struck me as rather hopeless . . . trying to find radio signals from intelligent creatures."

"Whattaya mean, hopeless?"

"Why should an intelligent race send radio signals out into interstellar space?" I asked. "Think of the power it requires, and the likelihood that it's all wasted effort, because there's no one within range to talk to."

"Well . . . it's worth a try, isn't it . . . if you think there could be intelligent creatures somewhere else . . . on a planet of another star."

"Hmph. We're trying to find another intelligent race; are we transmitting radio signals?"

"No," he admitted. "Congress wouldn't vote the money for a transmitter that big."

"Exactly," I said. "We're listening, but not transmitting."

Rizzo wasn't discouraged. "Listen, the chances—just on statistical figuring alone—the chances are that there're millions of other solar systems with intelligent life. We've got to try contacting them! They might have knowledge that we don't

have . . . answers to questions that we can't solve yet . . ."

"I completely agree," I said.

"But listening for radio signals is the wrong way to do it."

"Huh?"

"Radio broadcasting requires too much power to cover interstellar distances efficiently. We should be *looking* for signals, not listening for them."

"Looking?"

"Lasers," I said, pointing to the low-key lights over the consoles. "Optical lasers. Superlamps shining out in the darkness of the void. Pump in a modest amount of electrical power, excite a few trillion atoms, and out comes a coherent, pencil-thin beam of light that can be seen for millions of miles."

"Millions of miles aren't light-years," Rizzo muttered.

"We're rapidly approaching the point where we'll have lasers capable of lightyear ranges. I'm sure that some intelligent race somewhere in this galaxy has achieved the necessary technology to signal from star to star—by light beams."

"Then how come we haven't seen any?" Rizzo demanded.

"Perhaps we already have."

"What?"

"We've observed all sorts of variable stars—Cepheids, RR Lyrae's, T Tauri's. We assume that what we see are stars, pulsating and changing brightness for

reasons that are natural, but unexplainable to us. Now, suppose what we are really viewing are laser beams, signalling from planets that circle stars too faint to be seen from Earth?"

In spite of himself, Rizzo looked intrigued.

"It would be fairly simple to examine the spectra of such light sources and determine whether they're natural stars or artificial laser beams."

"Have you tried it?"

I nodded.

"And?"

I hesitated long enough to make him hold his breath, waiting for my answer. "No soap. Every variable star I've examined is a real star."

He let out his breath in a long, disgusted puff. "Ahhh, you were kidding all along. I thought so."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose I was."

TIME dragged along in the weather dome. I had managed to smuggle a small portable telescope along with me, and tried to make observations whenever possible. But the weather was usually too poor. Rizzo, almost in desperation for something to do, started to build an electronic image-amplifier for me.

Our one link with the rest of the world was our weekly radio message from McMurdo. The times for the messages were ran-

domly scrambled, so that the chances of their being intercepted or jammed were lessened. And we were ordered to maintain strict radio silence.

As the weeks sloughed on, we learned that one of our manned satellites had been boarded by the Reds at gunpoint. Our spacecrews had put two Red automated spy-satellites out of commission. Shots had been exchanged on an ice-island in the Arctic. And six different nations were testing nuclear bombs.

We didn't get any mail of course. Our letters would be waiting for us at McMurdo when we were relieved. I thought about Gloria and our two children quite a bit, and tried not to think about the blast and fallout patterns in the San Francisco area, where they were.

"My wife hounded me until I spent pretty nearly every damned cent I had on a shelter, under the house," Rizzo told me. "Damned shelter is fancier than the house. She's the social leader of the disaster set. If we don't have a war, she's gonna feel damned silly."

I said nothing.

The weather cleared and steadied for a while (days and nights were indistinguishable during the long Antarctic winter) and I split my time evenly between monitoring the meteorological sensors and observing the stars.

The snow had covered the dome completely, of course, but our "snorkel" burrowed through it and out into the air.

"This dome's just like a submarine, only we're submerged in snow instead of water," Rizzo observed. "I just hope we don't sink to the bottom."

"The calculations show that we'll be all right."

He made a sour face. "Calculations proved that airplanes would never get off the ground."

The storms closed in again, but by the time they cleared once more, Rizzo had completed the image-amplifier for me. Now, with the tiny telescope I had, I could see almost as far as a professional instrument would allow. I could even lie comfortably in my bunk, watch the amplifier's viewscreen, and control the entire set-up remotely.

Then it happened.

At first it was simply a curiosity. An oddity.

I HAPPENED to be studying a Cepheid variable star—one of the huge, very bright stars that pulsate so regularly that you can set your watch by them. It had attracted my attention because it seemed to be unusually close for a Cepheid—only 700 lightyears away. The distance could be easily gauged by timing the star's pulsations.*

I talked Rizzo into helping me

set up a spectrometer. We scavenged shamelessly from the dome's spare parts bin and finally produced an instrument that would break up the light of the star into its component wavelengths, and thereby tell us much about the star's chemical composition and surface temperature.

At first I didn't believe what I saw.

The star's spectrum—a broad rainbow of colors—was crisscrossed with narrow dark lines. That was all right. They're called absorption lines; the Sun has thousands of them in its spectrum. But one line—one—was an insolently bright emission line. All the laws of physics and chemistry said it couldn't be there.

But it was.

We photographed the star dozens of times. We checked our instruments ceaselessly. I spent hours scanning the star's "official" spectrum in the microspool reader. The bright emission line was not on the catalogue spectrum. There was nothing wrong with our instruments.

Yet the bright line showed up. It was real.

"I don't understand it," I ad-

*Astronomers have been able, since about 1910, to estimate the distances of Cepheid variable stars by timing their pulsations. The length of this type of star's pulsation is a true measure of its intrinsic brightness. Comparing the star's actual brightness to its apparent brightness, as seen from Earth, gives a good value for the star's distance.

mitted. "I've seen stars with bright emission spectra before, but a single bright line in an absorption spectrum! It's unheard-of. One single wavelength . . . one particular type of atom at one precise energy-level . . . why? Why is it emitting energy when the other wavelengths aren't?"

Rizzo was sitting on his bunk, puffing a cigaret. He blew a cloud of smoke at the low ceiling. "Maybe it's one of those laser signals you were telling me about a couple weeks ago."

I scowled at him. "Come on, now. I'm serious. This thing has me puzzled."

"Now wait a minute . . . you're the one who said radio astronomers were straining their ears for nothing. You're the one who said we ought to be looking. So look!" He was enjoying his revenge.

I shook my head, and turned back to the meteorological equipment.

But Rizzo wouldn't let up. "Suppose there's an intelligent race living on a planet near a Cepheid variable star. They figure that any other intelligent creatures would have astronomers who'd be curious about their star, right? So they send out a laser signal that matches the star's pulsations. When you look at the star, you see their signal. What's more logical?"

"All right," I groused. "You've had your joke . . ."

"Tell you what," he insisted. "Let's put that one wavelength into an oscilloscope and see if a definite signal comes out. Maybe it'll spell out 'Take me to your leader' or something."

I IGNORED him and turned my attention to Army business. The meteorological equipment was functioning perfectly, but our orders read that one of us had to check it every twelve hours. So I checked and tried to keep my eyes from wandering as Rizzo tinkered with a photocell and oscilloscope.

"There we are," he said, at length. "Now let's see what they're telling us."

In spite of myself I looked up at the face of the oscilloscope. A steady, gradually sloping greenish line was traced across the screen.

"No message," I said.

Rizzo shrugged elaborately.

"If you leave the 'scope on for two days, you'll find that the line makes a full swing from peak to null," I informed him. "The star pulsates every two days, bright to dim."

"Let's turn up the gain," he said, and he flicked a few knobs on the front of the 'scope.

The line didn't change at all.

"What's the sweep speed?" I asked.

"One nanosecond per centimeter." That meant that each centimeter-wide square on the screen's face represented one billionth of a second. There are as many nanoseconds in one second as there are seconds in thirty-two years.

"Well, if you don't get a signal at that sensitivity, there just isn't any signal there," I said.

Rizzo nodded. He seemed slightly disappointed that his joke was at an end. I turned back to the meteorological instruments, but I couldn't concentrate on them. Somehow I felt disappointed, too. Subconsciously, I suppose, I had been hoping that Rizzo actually would detect a signal from the star. *Fool!* I told myself. But what could explain that bright emission line? I glanced up at the oscilloscope again.

And suddenly the smooth steady line broke into a jagged series of millions of peaks and nulls!

I stared at it.

Rizzo was back on his bunk again, reading one of his magazines. I tried to call him, but the words froze in my throat. Without taking my eyes from the flickering 'scope, I reached out and touched his arm.

He looked up.

"Holy Mother of God," Rizzo whispered.

For a long time we stared si-

lently at the fluttering line dancing across the oscilloscope screen, bathing our tiny dome in its weird greenish light. It was eerily fascinating, hypnotic. The line never stood still; it jabbered and stuttered, a series of millions of little peaks and nulls, changing almost too fast for the eye to follow, up and down, calling to us, speaking to us, up, down, never still, never quiet, constantly flickering its unknown message to us.

"Can it be . . . people?" Rizzo wondered. His face, bathed in the greenish light, was suddenly furrowed, withered, ancient: a mixture of disbelief and fear.

"What else could it be?" I heard my own voice answer. "There's no other explanation possible."

We sat mutely for God knows how long.

Finally Rizzo asked, "What do we do now?"

THE question broke our entranced mood. What do we do? What action do we take? We're thinking men, and we've been contacted by other creatures that can think, reason, send a signal across seven hundred lightyears of space. So don't just sit there in stupified awe. Use your brain, prove that you're worthy of the tag *sapiens*.

"We decode the message," I announced. Then, as an after-

thought, "But don't ask me how."

We should have called McMurdo, or Washington. Or perhaps we should have attempted to get a message through to the United Nations. But we never even thought of it. This was our problem. Perhaps it was the sheer isolation of our dome that kept us from thinking about the rest of the world. Perhaps it was sheer luck.

"If they're using lasers," Rizzo reasoned, "they must have a technology something like ours."

"Must have had," I corrected. "That message is seven hundred years old, remember. They were playing with lasers when King John was signing the Magna Charta and Genghis Khan owned most of Asia. Lord knows what they have now."

Rizzo blanched and reached for another cigaret.

I turned back to the oscilloscope. The signal was still flashing across its face.

"They're sending out a signal," I mused, "probably at random. Just beaming it out into space, hoping that someone, somewhere will pick it up. It must be in some form of code . . . but a code that they feel can be easily cracked by anyone with enough intelligence to realize that there's a message there."

"Sort of an interstellar Morse code."

I shook my head. "Morse code depends on both sides knowing the code. There's no key."

"Cryptographers crack codes."

"Sure. If they know what language is being used. We don't know the language, we don't know the alphabet, the thought processes . . . nothing."

"But it's a code that can be cracked easily," Rizzo muttered.

"Yes," I agreed. "Now what the hell kind of a code can they assume will be known to another race that they've never seen?"

Rizzo leaned back on his bunk and his face was lost in shadows.

"An interstellar code," I rambled on. "Some form of presenting information that would be known to almost any race intelligent enough to understand lasers . . ."

"Binary!" Rizzo snapped, sitting up on the bunk.

"What?"

"Binary code. To send a signal like this, they've gotta be able to write a message in units that're only a billionth of a second long. That takes computers. Right? Well, if they have computers, they must figure that we have computers. Digital computers run on binary code. Off or on . . . go or no-go. It's simple. I'll bet we can slap that signal on a tape and run it through our computer here."

"To assume that they use com-

puters exactly like ours . . .”

“Maybe the computers are completely different,” Rizzo said excitedly, “but the binary code is basic to them all. I’ll bet on that! And this computer we’ve got here—this transistorized baby—she can handle more information than the whole Army could feed into her. I’ll bet nothing has been developed anywhere that’s better for handling simple one-plus-one types of operations.”

I shrugged. “All right. It’s worth a trial.”

IT took Rizzo a few hours to get everything properly set up. I did some arithmetic while he worked. If the message was in binary code, that meant that every cycle of the signal—every flick of the dancing line on our screen—carried a bit of information. The signal’s wavelength was 5000 Angstroms; there are a hundred million Angstrom units to the centimeter; figuring the speed of light . . . the signal could carry, in theory at least, something like 600 trillion bits of information *per second*.

I told Rizzo.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been going over the same numbers in my head.” He set a few switches on the computer control board. “Now let’s see how many of the 600 trillion we can pick up.” He sat down before the board and pressed a series of buttons.

We watched, hardly breathing, as the computer’s spools began spinning and the indicator lights flashed across the control board. Within a few minutes, the printer chugged to life.

Rizzo swivelled his chair over to the printer and held up the unrolling sheet in a trembling hand.

Numbers. Six digit numbers. Completely meaningless.

“Gibberish,” Rizzo snapped.

It was peculiar. I felt relieved and disappointed at the same time.

“Something’s screwy,” Rizzo said. “Maybe I fouled up the circuits . . .”

“I don’t think so,” I answered. “After all, what did you expect out of the computer? Shakespearean poetry?”

“No, but I expected numbers that would make some sense. One and one, maybe. Something that means something. This stuff is nowhere.”

Our nerves must have really been wound tight, because before we knew it we were in the middle of a nasty argument—and it was over nothing, really. But in the middle of it:

“Hey, look,” Rizzo shouted, pointing to the oscilloscope.

The message had stopped. The scope showed only the calm, steady line of the star’s basic two-day-long pulsation.

It suddenly occurred to us that

we hadn't slept for more than 36 hours, and we were both exhausted. We forgot the senseless argument. The message was ended. Perhaps there would be another; perhaps not. We had the telescope, spectrometer, photocell, oscilloscope, and computer set to record automatically. We collapsed into our bunks. I suppose I should have had monumental dreams. I didn't. I slept like a dead man.

WHEN we woke up, the oscilloscope trace was still quiet.

"Y'know," Rizzo muttered, "it might just be a fluke . . . I mean, maybe the signals don't mean a damned thing. The computer is probably translating nonsense into numbers just because it's built to print out numbers and nothing else."

"Not likely," I said. "There are too many coincidences to be explained. 'We're receiving a message, I'm certain of it. Now we've got to crack the code.'"

As if to reinforce my words, the oscilloscope trace suddenly erupted into the same flickering pattern. The message was being sent again.

We went through two weeks of it. The message would run through for seven hours, then stop for seven. We transcribed it on tape 48 times and ran it through the computer constantly. Always the same result—six-

digit numbers; millions of them. There were six different seven-hour-long messages, being repeated one after the other, constantly.

We forgot the meteorological equipment. We ignored the weekly messages from McMurdo. The rest of the world became a meaningless fiction to us. There was nothing but the confounded, tantalizing, infuriating, enthralling message. The National Emergency, the bomb tests, families, duties—all transcended, all forgotten. We ate when we thought of it and slept when we couldn't keep our eyes open any longer. The message. What was it? What was the key to unlock its meaning?

"It's got to be something universal," I told Rizzo. "Something universal . . . in the widest sense of the term."

He looked up from his desk, which was wedged in between the end of his bunk and the curving dome wall. The desk was littered with printout sheets from the computer, each one of them part of the message.

"You've only said that a half-million times in the past couple weeks. What the hell is universal? If you can figure that out, you're damned good."

What is universal? I wondered. *You're an astronomer. You look out at the universe. What do you see?* I thought about it. *What do*

I see? Stars, gas, dust clouds, planets . . . what's universal about them? What do they all have that . . .

"Atoms!" I blurted.

Rizzo cocked a weary eye at me. "Atoms?"

"Atoms. Elements. Look . . ."

I grabbed up a fistful of the sheets and thumbed through them. "Look . . . each message starts with a list of numbers. Then there's a long blank to separate the opening list from the rest of the message. See? Every time, the same length list."

"So?"

"The periodic table of the elements!" I shouted into his ear. "That's the key!"

Rizzo shook his head. "I thought of that two days ago. No soap. In the first place, the list that starts each message isn't always the same. It's the same length, all right, but the numbers change. In the second place, it always begins with 100000. I looked up the atomic weight of hydrogen—it's 1.008 something."

That stopped me for a moment. But then something clicked into place in my mind.

WHY is the hydrogen weight 1.008?" Before Rizzo could answer, I went on, "For two reasons. The system we use arbitrarily rates oxygen as 16-even. Right? All the other weights are

calculated from oxygen's. And we also give the average weight of an element, counting all its isotopes. Our weight for hydrogen also includes an adjustment for tiny amounts of deuterium and tritium. Right? Well, suppose *they* have a system that rates hydrogen as a flat one: 1.00000. Doesn't *that* make sense?"

"You're getting punchy," Rizzo grumbled. "What about the isotopes? How can they expect us to handle decimal points if they don't tell us about them . . . mental telepathy? What about . . ."

"Stop arguing and start calculating," I snapped. "Change that list of numbers to agree with our periodic table. Change 1.00000 to 1.008-whatever-it-is and tackle the next few elements. The decimals shouldn't be so hard to figure out."

Rizzo grumbled to himself, but started working out the calculations. I stepped over to the dome's microspool library and found an elementary physics text. Within a few minutes, Rizzo had some numbers and I had the periodic table focused on the microspool reading machine.

"Nothing," Rizzo said, leaning over my shoulder and looking at the screen. "They don't match at all."

"Try another list. They're not all the same."

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He shrugged and returned to his desk. After a while he called out, "Their second number is 3.97123; it works out to 4.003-something."

It checked! "Good. That's helium. What about the next one, lithium?"

"That's 6.940."

"Right!"

Rizzo went to work furiously after that. I pushed a chair to the desk and began working up from the end of the list. It all checked out, from hydrogen to a few elements beyond the artificial ones that had been created in the laboratories here on Earth.

"That's it," I said. "That's the key. That's our Rosetta Stone . . . the periodic table."

Rizzo stared at the scribbled numbers and jumble of papers. "I bet I know what the other lists are . . . the ones that don't make sense."

"Oh?"

"There are other ways to identify the elements . . . vibration resonances, quantum wavelengths . . . somebody named Lewis came out a couple years ago with a Quantum Periodic Table . . ."

"They're covering all the possibilities. There are messages for many different levels of understanding. We just decoded the simplest one."

"Yeah."

I noticed that as he spoke, Rizzo's hand—still tightly clutching the pencil—was trembling and white with tension.

"Well?"

Rizzo licked his lips. "Let's get to work."

WE were like two men possessed. Eating, sleeping, even talking was ignored completely as we waded through the hundreds of sheets of paper. We could decode only a small percentage of them, but they still represented many hours of communication. The sheets that we couldn't decode, we suspected, were repetitions of the same message that we were working on.

We lost all concept of time. We must have slept, more than once, but I simply don't remember. All I can recall is thousands of numbers, row upon row, sheet after sheet of numbers . . . and my pencil scratching symbols of the various chemical elements over them until my hand was so cramped I could no longer open the fingers.

The message consisted of a long series of formulas; that much was certain. But, without punctuation, with no knowledge of the symbols that denote even such simple things as "plus" or "equals" or "yields," it took us more weeks of hard work to unravel the sense of each equation. And even then, there was more

to the message than met the eye:

"Just what the hell are they driving at?" Rizzo wondered aloud. His face had changed: it was thinner, hollow-eyed, weary, covered with a scraggly beard.

"Then you think there's a meaning behind all these equations, too?"

He nodded. "It's a message, not just a contact. They're going to an awful lot of trouble to beam out this message, and they're repeating it every seven hours. They haven't added anything new in the weeks we've been watching."

"I wonder how many years or centuries they've been sending out this message, waiting for someone to pick it up, looking for someone to answer them."

"Maybe we should call Washington . . ."

"No!"

Rizzo grinned. "Afraid of breaking radio silence?"

"Hell no. I just want to wait until we're relieved, so we can make this announcement in person. I'm not going to let some old wheezer in Washington get credit for this. . . . Besides, I want to know just what they're trying to tell us."

It was agonizing, painstaking work. Most of the formulas meant nothing to either one of us. We had to ransack the dome's meager library of microspools to

piece them together. They started simply enough—basic chemical combinations of carbon and two oxygens yield CO_2 ; two hydrogens and oxygen give water. A primer . . . not of words, but of equations.

The equations became steadily longer and more complex. Then, abruptly, they simplified, only to begin a new deepening, simplify again, and finally become very complicated just at the end. The last few lines were obviously repetitious.

Gradually, their meaning became clear to us.

The first set of equations started off with simple, naturally-occurring energy yielding formulas. The oxidation of cellulose (we found the formula for that in an organic chemistry text left behind by one of the dome's previous occupants), which probably referred to the burning of plants and vegetation. A string of formulas that had groupings in them that I dimly recognized as amino acids—no doubt something to do with digesting food. There were many others, including a few that Rizzo claimed had the expression for chlorophyll in them.

"Naturally-occurring, energy-yielding reactions," Rizzo summarized. "They're probably trying to describe the biological set-up on their planet."

It seemed an inspired guess.

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THE second set of equations again began with simple formulas. The cellulose-burning reaction appeared again, but this time it was followed by equations dealing with the oxidation of hydrocarbons: coal and oil burning? A long series of equations that bore repeatedly the symbols for many different metals came up next, followed by more on hydrocarbons, and then a string of formulas that we couldn't decipher at all.

This time it was my guess: "These look like energy-yielding reactions, too. At least in the beginning. But they don't seem to be naturally occurring types. Then comes a long story about metals. They're trying to tell us the history of their technological development—burning wood, coal and eventually oil; smelting metals . . . they're showing us how they developed their technology."

The final set of equations began with an ominous simplicity: a short series of very brief symbols that had the net result of four hydrogen atoms building into a helium atom. Nuclear fusion.

"That's the proton-proton reaction," I explained to Rizzo. "The type of fusion that goes on in the Sun."

The next series of equations spelled out the more complex carbon-nitrogen cycle of nuclear fu-

sion, which was probably the primary energy source of their own Cepheid variable star. Then came a long series of equations that we couldn't decode in detail, but the symbols for uranium and plutonium, and some of the heavier elements, kept cropping up.

Then came one line that told us the whole story: the lithium-hydride equation—nuclear fusion bombs.

The equations went on to more complex reactions, formulas that no man on Earth had ever seen before. They were showing us the summation of their knowledge, and they had obviously been dealing with nuclear energies for much longer than we have on Earth.

But interspersed among the new equations, they repeated a set of formulas that always began with the lithium hydride fusion reaction. The message ended in a way that wrenched my stomach: the fusion bomb reaction and its cohorts were repeated ten straight times.

I'M not sure of what day it was on the calendar, but the clock on the master control console said it well past eleven.

Rizzo rubbed a weary hand across his eyes. "Well, what do you think?"

"It's pretty obvious," I said. "They have the bombs. They've had them for quite some time.

They must have a lot of other weapons, too—more . . . advanced. They're trying to tell us their history with the equations. First they depended on natural sources of energy, plants and animals; then they developed artificial energy sources and built up a technology; finally they discovered nuclear energy."

"How long do you think they've had the bombs?"

"Hard to tell. A generation . . . a century. What difference does it make? They have them. They probably thought, at first, that they could learn to live with them . . . but imagine what it must be like to have those weapons at your fingertips . . . for a century. Forever. Now they're so scared of them that they're beaming their whole history out into space, looking for someone to tell them how to live with the bombs, how to avoid using them."

"You could be wrong," Rizzo said. "They could be boasting about their arsenal."

"Why? For what reason? No . . . the way they keep repeating those last equations. They're pleading for help."

Rizzo turned to the oscilloscope. It was flickering again.

"Think it's the same thing?"

"No doubt. You're taping it anyway, aren't you?"

"Yeah, sure. Automatically."

Suddenly, in mid-flight, the signal winked off. The pulsations

didn't simply smooth out into a steady line, as they had before. The screen simply went dead.

"That's funny," Rizzo said, puzzled. He checked the oscilloscope. "Nothing wrong here. Something must've happened to the telescope."

Suddenly I knew what had happened. "Take the spectrometer off and turn on the image-amplifier," I told him.

I knew what we would see. I knew why the oscilloscope beam had suddenly gone off scale. And the knowledge was making me sick.

Rizzo removed the spectrometer set-up and flicked the switch that energized the image-amplifier's viewscreen.

"Holy God!"

The dome was flooded with light. The star had exploded.

"They had the bombs all right," I heard myself saying. "And they couldn't prevent themselves from using them. And they had a lot more, too. Enough to push their star past its natural limits."

Rizzo's face was etched in the harsh light.

"I've gotta get out of here," he muttered, looking all around the cramped dome. "I've gotta get back to my wife and find someplace where it's safe . . ."

"Someplace?" I asked, staring at the screen "Where?"

THE END

ANSWER, PLEASE ANSWER

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KING SOLOMON'S RING

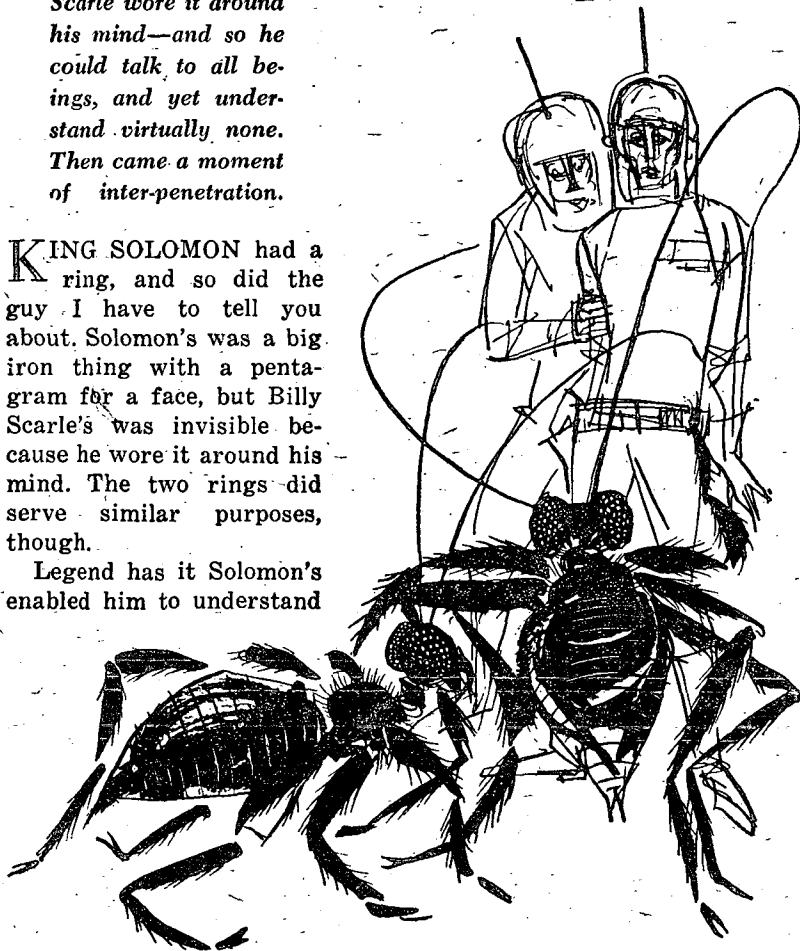
By ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrator BLAIR

Scarle wore it around his mind—and so he could talk to all beings, and yet understand virtually none. Then came a moment of inter-penetration.

KING SOLOMON had a ring, and so did the guy I have to tell you about. Solomon's was a big iron thing with a pentagram for a face, but Billy Scarle's was invisible because he wore it around his mind. The two rings did serve similar purposes, though.

Legend has it Solomon's enabled him to understand



the language of beasts. Scarle, as you may remember, also had the gift of tongues. I suppose that was the reason for his peculiar susceptibilities.

I am writing this letter, Lisa, because you are the one who managed to recruit him and I think he was in love with you. Maybe I am wrong. If so, I can only ask pardon for the intrusion and trust to your sense of humor to put things in perspective.

Last night (I think it was last night) I was having dinner/s with Doctor Hale, whom you have never met. He is a big panda of a man—white boots (generally), wide black trousers (always), white shirt (always), black tie (ditto), and black on top (mostly). He has the feral eyes, too, and he listens to the world through a pair of puffed teacups (he used to be a lightweight—a pretty good one); and he has a nose like the old Eiffel Tower, and bent, and he manages to get by with less couchside blather than other complex-pushers I've met. He claims his record as a therapeutic Svengali is based on the fact that his patients tend to feel sorry for him on first sight, but I sometimes wonder. Once he turns on that snow machine of his, his fat face sort of melts until it seems you are staring at a portrait of Machiavelli in retirement.

He is not retired, though, and he has a very professional manner with steaks . . .

Between mouthfuls: "What about Billy Scarle?"

"You're the doctor. You tell me."

"I value your opinion."

"In that case, you're losing your touch. I don't have one."

"Then manufacture one, because I want it."

I bit into a roll, buying myself thirty seconds' mulling time, and proceeded to mull.

SCARLE'S early career had been a success mainly because it was a minimum personnel operation. He did not trust too many people, so everyone aboard his ship was a close-mouthed specialist in many things. What puzzled the Guard for a long time was the fact that he was very unconventional in disposing of the fruits of his piracies. Dozens of the worlds on the Exploratory Perimeter are no more than encyclopedia entries followed by a couple sentences, but there are many excellent trading centers among them. Language is a genuine barrier, though, and there just *aren't* that many interpreters, especially for bootlegging operations.

What it took you a long time to figure out was something that Scarle was barely aware of him-

self. He just thought he had mastered galactic sign language, and that the hybrid patois of Fenster, his home world, was sufficient to fill in the gaps. Bear in mind, Lisa, that while he was clever he was only nominally educated in a Slumschule, and was quite naive in many matters. Still, it took the Circle of Solomon to tip off the Guard as to what they were dealing with.

After his apprehension on Martin VIII, it was his ratty luck to be shipped Earthwards in the custody of an old Guardsman ready for retirement. As you know, the cop decided along the way that the arrest had been out of jurisdiction, and he also decided he did not want a black mark on his record at that stage in the game. So he changed a couple log entries and elected himself judge, jury, and executioner—as you may not know. He never said a word while he made the preparations, but of course Scarle *knew*.

I suppose it would be interesting to tell you the details of the cop's not being able to pull the trigger and Scarle's smashing him to pieces with his arm collars, but I'd rather not be that interesting. I've heard the story too many times.

When you picked him up in that bar on Kimberly he was beginning to suspect what he was, but he was too busy vacationing

to do much experimenting. He was lying low and feeling high, and shopping around for a new rig, that night you sat down across from his whisky-and-fleat and offered to tell his fortune.

Naturally he said "yes", because you are beautiful.

"The thirteenth card of the Major Arcana," you told him, "is the Boney Reaper. He signifies Death, often only on metaphysical levels, but a death, nevertheless. Your life is going to change."

And he smiled and agreed and asked if you wanted to help change it, and you smiled and agreed, sort of. It took about a week of his being puzzled (because he could not anticipate you the way he could other people), before you knew he was ready for The Bet. (*Did you have that Tarot up your sleeve? He wondered that on several occasions, so I thought I would ask.*) It was well managed, I gather, and of course the prediction turned out to be quite true.

For the wagered price of one cruiser he agreed to be your quarry. You managed to convince him that you were rich (which was also true, now I think of it) and looking for kicks (which might have held an incidental truth, at that). He could not back down, not that he wanted to, because he had boasted too much beforehand. And he

did have a high survival potential also, as it was only by accident that I managed to kill him when I finally had to.

THREE days for him to hide himself in the jungles of Kimberley, and a week in which he had to stay hidden, despite your trackers, your mechanical spiders, and your electronic B.O. detectors, and he did it. I remember the night you told me about it. It was on Lilith, with a sky full of moons and a fine, tangy sea breeze assaulting the smells of roast Süssesvogel and Lilithmosel (that pagan Liebfraumilch!)—Do you recall the name of the place? I seem to forget it now, but I remember the balcony quite vividly, and you were wearing something dark blue . . . Oh well.

It took three days to find his trail, you said, and six hours to close in on him. Then he escaped when you approached his campsite. This happened a couple times, until you had flushed him onto the higher ground near the Gila Range. Remember now? The spiders stopped coming back, and you started finding them smashed to bits until you were out of spiders. By then it became apparent that he was mounted, because he started moving very fast and the broken spiders showed hoofmarks. After the fifth day the trackers gave

up, without admitting it, and the “dogs” grew interested in other matters.

At the end of the week he walked into your camp, all smiles, and aware of his power. He had won The Bet by destroying the mechanical hunters, circling around behind your party, and “eavesdropping” on your hunting beasts. Then he managed to “talk” them out of following him. He followed along behind you until the seven days were up, and then he walked in on you, clean-shaven, and thinking he had won. The poor sucker! He had been initiated into the most exclusive club in the galaxy and therewith reduced his life expectancy by ninety or a hundred years. Excuse me, dear, I’m not being bitter, but I liked the guy. If the Guard had gotten him to Earth alive he would have been recruited anyhow.

King Solomon had a ring, you told him—while you were on that month’s frolic about Earth and the Inworlds—a ring that enabled him to understand all the tongues of life. And you, Billy Scarle, you also have a ring. You wear it around your mind like an introverted chastity belt, and whenever anything is going to speak you know what it is going to say before it says it, and whenever you want to say something, and want to strongly enough, others know what you are going

to say before you say it. You are a fractional telepath and a potential paralinguist. You would probably flunk first semester French, which is an easy Orthotongue, but with the proper training you could be a two-way on-the-spot interpreter for any two languages without knowing either.

And he wanted to know if there was money in it! Do you remember him now? He was about fifteen, with that premature frost on his hair that comes of pushing poorly-shielded cruisers too far; nervous fingers, light eyes, a preference for nondescript clothing; and when he talked all his sentences seemed like one long word. At first glance, I guess he just did not give the impression of being much of a criminal. Rather, perhaps (and quite correctly), he seemed a person who would have had a hard time enjoying Mardi Gras time on Centuvo. Hale thinks this was the key to his talent, cast long ago on the streets of Fenster.

YOU offered him full Circle-ship, if he could pass the training, emphasizing its retro-active civil immunity as much as its high pay, so what else could he do? He realized you were his superior in nearly everything. He wanted to even things up, and his pride was always an amazing thing to behold—right

up until the end it made him equal to almost any task. I remember how he sweated over Chomsky's book (which did not mean much in the long run, because the Thing Applied was all sedation and sound cycles), but it furnished him with broad concepts, and things like concepts help smooth down rough edges. And as for the law—well, he *did* want an out.

He joined and you kept in touch: beautiful, witty, sophisticated, what shall I say?—polemics?—until he drew his first assignment and went incommunicado. What then, Lisa?

"I'll tell you, Doc," I said to Hale, "I was thinking of his first assignment./It was to that world called Malmson. You weren't along that trip, which is too bad. He felt we wrecked the whole society there, and it sort of got to him. I think he felt more responsible for it than one man has a right to feel."

"For what? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing out and out crushing. We didn't hook the population with narcotics or send their females to brothels, as we've often been accused of doing. We couldn't have done much physical exploitation if we'd wanted to—they were all about three feet tall and looked sort of like kiwis with arms. But Scarle really didn't know what he was doing yet. He thought it was all

setting up the hum box, taking a shot, and filling out the Omni-form. Of course, it doesn't stop with that.

"And?"

"He found out, after the Omni was Staff Evaluated and Malmson's borox deposits were deemed significant. A report was submitted and we left. A year later he went back for a visit—they should never let a paraling revisit one of his X-worlds . . . The industry we were imposing had already begun disrupting the culture's value systems—and because Scarle was a paraling he translated feelings as well as words when he talked with the creatures that second time. The deposed grow bitter, the young lose their roots—you know the story. Scarle had already had a couple other X's by then, but he came away unsure after that visit. He claimed we had no right to make aliens over into our image. He said he wanted to quit."

WHAT did the Circle say?"

"Nothing, officially. But he was subsequently visited by the woman who had recruited him, and she persuaded him to accept another assignment."

"This last one?"

"Right. Mack 997-IV, the world they call the Butcher. His recruiter explained to him that the first assignments were also in the nature of training, and she

proceeded to reveal the rest of the significance of the Ring."

"What was your second assignment like?" you asked him.

He told you that it had been to a brutal and nasty placé, with a smelly reptilian culture he had hated. Then you told him that it, also, would be changed as a result of his visit. It would be more congenial, by human standards, because of it. You then told him the full story of King Solomon's Ring—how it had been a divine gift to the Temple Builder, granting him the power to compel obedience from every demon in existence. Neither were all of the demons obnoxious, you assured him; some were useful and some were not. Those of particular malice were forced into bottles, to be stoppered with the ring's unbreakable seal, and cast into the seas to drift forever. The useful ones were put to work building the Temple. And you, Billy Scarle, wear the Ring of Solomon around your mind, and communication is not its only function. You are the Builder—you are enlisting every variety of aid for the construction of the interstellar Temple of Earth. It is the most godlike of all human responsibilities, and there are few of us, very few, capable of furthering this end. You have passed all your tests now, and you are an extremely gifted paralinguist. So gifted, in fact, that

we wish to entrust you with the most difficult assignment in our files . . .

"He bought it, of course," I finished, with a sip of Danzel coffee. "She could sell igloos on Mercury if she wanted."

THE day was bright, the sky was yellow, and Scarle set down his hum box.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"They won't talk today," he answered. "They just wanted to observe us. They'll be back in about forty hours. They're leaving now."

"Where are they?"

"Behind those bushes." He gestured toward a thicket of reddish, spikey-looking shrubs. "They'll go request permission to talk with us."

"From whom?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know that much? None of the equipment is operating."

"I got a partial impression a minute ago. They're telepathic themselves, and they were talking."

"What do they look like?"

"I don't know. Some sort of big insect, I think. I may be prejudiced by the reports from X1 and X2, though. I feel they're a slave-class creature."

"How come they've taken a week to make up their minds?" I asked him.

He shrugged negatively.

So we walked down to the river and went for a swim, because we had been ordered not to and the captain had no right to give such an order to S-personnel. The shaley ground had a pinholed complexion, the water was warmish, and a grudging breeze fanned us to near-comfort. It was easy to float in the waters of Mack the Knife, as we had nicknamed the Butcher, and there was nothing dangerous lurking below (nothing non-dangerous either—Mack had very little in the way of marine life).

"You scared?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

He did not answer.

"How sure are you of your stability?"

"Certain," he yawned. "Paralings are slightly prescient when it comes to organic actions. I'd know in advance if that horsefly that's going to land on your nose were going to bite mine."

I heard a buzz.

I slapped my nose with the flat of my hand, but there was no horsefly. Just a horselaugh.

"Reflex betrayed you," he said, "there are no flies on the Butcher."

I rolled quickly, hoping to dunk him good, but he was not there. His laughter came from a spot about forty feet away on the bank, where he sat smoking.

"'Certain,'" he repeated.
I rubbed my nose.

"Very funny. When you find a tarantula in your bunk tonight you'll know who . . ."

"Come off it," he called, "I had a point to prove. You were relaxed—ears near water level—background splashes—I didn't say a word. Admit you thought I was beside you. Admit I'm deceptive, cunning, and nasty."

"You know what's on my mind."

"Yes," he said, "you're worried the same thing will happen as before."

"Twice," I added. "Why the devil those bureaucrats couldn't send more than one paraling I . . ."

"One had always been sufficient elsewhere. It will be the same way this time."

"This is a real challenge for you, isn't it?" I snapped. "Whoever talked to you must have put it in a very missionary way."

"So what? An X is an X. I can make it."

"You're just a personnel problem for me," I said, "but the last two paralings to X here *are* still in the bughouse, with EEG readings pretty as horizons."

"There is an old Ortho parable," he told me, "about a guy who asked a computer when he was going to die."

I waited.

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing," he answered. "End of parable. It didn't know."

"Implication being—?"

"My chances of coming back have been calculated as pretty good. There are a lot fewer variables involved this time, because we have the reports of the first two expeditions. This problem *could* be programmed—so who are you to judge, off the cuff?"

I did not say anything. I just thought hard.

But he laughed again, because he had been born on Fenster and he knew the whole Dictionary of Galactic Profanity without having to look anything up.

When we reported back to the ship later, I felt he also knew I did not have any spare tarantulas along.

¶ It was two days before the creatures returned, and it was gray and raining when they appeared in the clearing. An open-sided field tent was quickly erected, and we donned slickers and sloughed off through the dark mud.

Scarle set the hum-box on a towelled-down table, and I studied our welcome committee . . .

Three of them . . . Ant-like, with the greenish cast of venerable bronze to their steel-hard hides; about the size of German Shepherds—but, I daresay, many times stronger; and eyes blank as Dorn's pink moons, of which they

reminded me—sightless seeming, but watching with a disconcerting fixity—and it might be they could see anything. (Do you remember Dorn?)

Scarle mouthed some words, turning on the recorder, and the reply came in a *clock-click, th-th, th, bittle-bittle-bittle* series of sounds. He pressed the "Investigate" button and took the black snap-case from his pocket. The red Insufficiency Light came on just as he finished assembling his hypodermic. He turned to the creatures and recited a sonnet by Shelley. It did not fit in with the day, but they responded with more noise and he pressed "Record" again. He jabbed the hypo into an ampule containing a mild sedative and gave himself an injection while they continued ticking.

They seemed to understand what he wanted, because they kept it up for a full four minutes this time. He thumbed the "Investigate" button once more, and I looked out beyond the tent flaps and through the rain.

The Butcher could easily be a treasure trove. The preliminary Geo reports had indicated untapped mineral resources and possible climatological suitability for raising the staples that underspaced Mother Earth found dwindling within her cities; on her shore to shore plains of steel and concrete the dirt Agcities

showed as acne rather than beauty marks. But amid the steel pores of Earth, wheat the interloper still meant bread. The Butcher might become a Baker.

THE green light glowed—Tentative Inflectional Patterning Established. Patterns, not meanings. There ain't no box can take *click-click, th-th, bittle-bittle* in one end, cold, and give you, "Good morning, it's raining like hell, isn't it?" out of the other. A completely unfamiliar body of significant sounds has no meaning to a stranger, man or machine, until a referent or two are picked up. Grammar and vocabulary take too long to obtain in times like these, and there were no telepaths good enough for total X, then. But all languages have patterns of inflection. The hum-box separated and established these patterns. It did not know whether they were interrogative, argumentative, repetitive, or what have you, but it sifted them.

The rest was up to Scarle and the hum.

The speakers were placed in their magic circle about the bugs; then another around us. Scarle, the peaceful-looking conductor, eyes at half mast and a drunken smile below, began the concert.

The two-channel inflectional humming began as he poked the

unit to life. Marginal audibility was preset on our side of things, and the "investigate" had guessed at the ants' auditory threshold on the basis of their recorded vocal range.

Transmission. Scale spoke under his breath, staring at nothing. Each of the ninety-seven questions of the Omni, with its optional subsections, lurked, script-like, in his mind. The thing, as you know it, Lisa, is carefully planned. I here detail you that Known, because I have things to say about it which will bear directly upon my subject.

THE scoffers first called it a sneaky way to dignify a seance, but all's quiet on that front these days. The dope, plus the occupation of the consciousness with the format of the Omni, is sufficient to conjure our ghosts—the thought-ghosts, which jump the gap between the consciousness of the Queried to that buried point in the mind of the Questioner, from whence they hitch a ride upward on waves of post-query curiosity, pouring into the wordless sentences of the half-heard hum. With a good paraling like Scarle, the ghosts visit us too, if we keep our minds quiet. His steno was a ling-journeyman who had never made it in transmission.

WORD BODY ONE (FULL RANGE INFLECT CYCLES): Good morn-

ing/afternoon/evening. We greet you in the name of Earth and bid you good hunting/fishing/harvests/fertile cattle/victories. We are warm-blooded, omnivorous, patriarchal, highly intelligent creatures. We need many things. We have many things to offer others, whether the others are like or different. What are you? What do you/have you/need you?

And question for question, each completes an Omni on the other. Theoretically, that places each in an equal position of knowledge, and appraises bargaining power on an above the board basis. Actually, since we designed it, along with the stock answers, and have refined the Staff Evaluation procedure from an art down to a science, we always come out on top. Equity is a pretty concept, but depth psychology, followed by military analysis and augmented by power on any level—from religious through economic—gives us our small advantages without disturbing the senates.

Like a bad connection on hyperphone came the ambisexual answers:

—Good morning. We are servants. We serve. Our owners/rulers lay eggs. We are omnivorous. We are intelligent. We do not need anything. Our owners/rulers give us all. What do you want?

And on it rolled. To all our key questions: *We do not do that/ know that/need that. Our owners /rulers do that/ know that/do not need that.*

They told us all about themselves. A dedicated entomologist would have been in a Moslem paradise of the mind over the interview, as—was our dedicated entomologist, Dave Bolton.

"Please," said he, "ask them if they see this polaroid flash—"

"Shh!" said I, who supervised. "Later."

Was I detecting a beartrap in the flowerbed of their cooperation?—We want to be helpful, but darn it! sir, we just do not know the answer to that one. Etc.

Do not suggest, I wrote on a slip of paper, that we speak with their masters. Wait and see if they offer.

I placed the note before Scarle, hoping that the act of reading it would keep him from transmitting the thought. I waited to see.

They offered.

Scarle turned to me.

"Tell them we must confer," I answered. "Ask where the masters are, what they are like, why they did not come themselves—and ask if they suggested we send you."

"Me?"

"You."

He asked, and they told us they would have to confer.

Yes, they finally acknowledged, as a matter of fact their rulers (who lived in eternal night) had mentioned that we could send them our only paraling if anything needed clarification. Did we care to?

"Tell them 'yes,'" I said, "but not today. We need to confer some more."

That afternoon we Staff Evaluated a very sketchy Omni.

WE decided, after an intrepid imaginative foray, that the rulers were similar to ant queens and did not like to leave the nest. Our mission was to get an Omni on the Butcher, evaluate it; and write a recommendation, so we had to go see them if they would not come to us. We wanted to set up safeguards, though, so Scarle spent the night learning the depressive neuroses Hale said he could retreat into to protect his sanity, if the going got rough.

"Quite against the rules, we also armed ourselves to the teeth," I said to Hale, "and then armed our teeth with the little glass capsules I almost got to taste. You didn't know about those."

"I had guessed, of course," he snorted. "There was nothing wrong with my neuroses, though. I gave him the best ones I had in stock."

"I'm sure he appreciated that," I answered, pouring him a drink.

"Do you believe the legend of King Solomon's ring?"

"Well, archetypically—"

"Archetypes, hell! Do you believe the story?"

"Yes, it has many levels of non-conscious meaning."

"Well step over to my level for a minute and answer the question. Forget the psych-structure stuff. Can one intelligence control another by non-physical means?"

"Charisma," he stated, "is a peculiar phenomenon. Many factors are generally operative."

"Have another drink and swallow your charisma along with it. I'm talking about parapsych stuff. If a paraling can send and receive thoughts and feelings, why not more than that?"

"Commands?" he asked. "Parahypnotics? That can be accomplished, under special circumstances."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a lightning bolt fusing sand in its own image."

I started to pour again.

"No," he declined it, "psychologists just get drunk, but psychiatrists get drunk and break things. What are you driving at with all this?"

"The Ring works both ways."

It does, Lisa. More than just translation. That first dim day in the caves Scarle ended a 30-second exchange and the steno threw down his transcriber.

"I can not record," he said.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The hum-box isn't working right. I'm not getting voices, or even concepts."

"What are you getting?"

"A very beautiful humming sound—it's like a piece of music—an emotional synopsis of something. Don't ask me what."

I didn't. I asked Scarle. Angry at having been lulled into a pleasant lethargy myself, I shook off the spell and called out.

"What's going on?"

"Shh!"

I groped for his shoulder in the murk, but his whisper had no direction and he was nowhere near the machine.

"Lights!" I called. But before I called it, I thought it.

There was a sound like someone scrubbing concrete with a hard-bristled brush and our beams exploded in all directions.

WE humans were alone, and Scarle. He leaned against the wall of the tunnel about ten feet in advance of our party, and he was smiling. I repeated my question.

"Nothing," he answered. "Nothing's going on now. I wish you hadn't turned on the lights. You broke the agreement."

"I was not anxious to become anything's breakfast," I told him. "What were you doing?"

"I was telling her how I looted

the Moonstone in mid-flight."

"You pulled that one."
"I did!"
"Why were you telling them about it?"

"Because I was asked. It was in my memory and a fuller explanation of the principle of illicit appropriation was desired."

I remember that I whistled then—in order to keep myself from doing anything else.

"That is not exactly Omni material," I said softly.

"No, but I was asked . . ."

"Why?"

"She was curious as to the pleasure linked with the thoughts."

"She?"

"Yes, a female. You were right about queens."

"An ant?"

"I guess so."

"Why won't she let us see her?"

"I believe the light bothers her eyes."

"The whole thing smells. I want a full report on this X after we get back to the ship, but let's get back fast. I don't like it here."

He smiled and shrugged and I checked the ampule, but he had not taken an overdose.

Later, I asked him again.

"They want to know how to loot a spaceship?"

"No." He leaned back in a re-

cliner, blowing smoke rings.

"She only wondered about the pleasure-associations."

"So what did you tell her?"

"Nothing, I just let her look at my mind."

"Then what did she say?"

"Nothing, she seemed satisfied."

"Why were the pleasure-associations there?"

He smiled slightly.

"I enjoy stealing. Especially when I can get away with it."

"Unfortunately," I replied, "that tells me more about you than it does about the ants."

"You asked me a question. I answered it."

"What came next?"

"That's all. You turned on the lights."

"That's not much."

"I didn't turn on the lights."

"Okay," I growled. "How come Brown couldn't record?"

"We were using a form of mental shorthand."

"Where did you learn it?"

"I just sort of fell into it today. They're natural paralings."

"That, in itself, is a valuable commodity. We'll have to investigate it, along with the Omni stuff."

"I agree. Next time don't turn on the lights, though."

"All right, mister. But no more professional advice on space piracy."

"No more," he promised.

SO we went back into the underground cities of the Butcher, guided by belt sonar, and five-watt flicker buttons, to mine the minds of the ants.

Brown was still unable to record anything; under hypnosis he could recall the transmission sensations, but nothing else. We had to rely on Scarle for the reports, and after about a week and a half I was no longer sure we were getting them.

"Scarle, have you been editing your reports?"

"No."

"Would you care to verify that under drugs?"

"You calling me a liar?"

"Perhaps."

"Okay, give me some drugs," he laughed.

Then the thought occurred to me (maybe he had sent it when he laughed) that the drugs would not prove anything. He had built up a resistance to most of the hypnotics while in training; they just made his mind shift gears.

"Forget it," I told him.

"I already have," he agreed.

What we really needed was another paraling to check on the paraling we already had.

SCARLE's reports showed us the picture of a giant ant-colony, ruled in the classic monolithic manner. Its structure seemed one of low workers, mid-

dle workers, upper workers, warriors, consorts, and queens. It was an agrarian culture which had never developed a single tool, relying rather upon classes of physically specialized individuals for the accomplishment of work. It was based on a matriarchal concept which permeated its religion in a manner similar (I think) to the old Egyptian notion of the Pharaohs' divine de-cendency.

I emptied the little coffee pot into the tiny cups, motioned to the waiter to bring us another, and looked out across the sunken gardens of Luna at the mossy ball shaping Americas above the great dome: Europe rolling away, Andalusia teasing memories from my mind, and the Gulf beginning to drip salt on sore places, Lisa. By the way, by the time you receive this billy-do, my dear, I will no longer be here, but there, and winging guess where?

"Both ways?" Hale asked me, a perplexed expression dodging about the Eiffel Tower.

I turned back, nodding.

"Yes, I suspected it after Scarle's reports started sounding as if I were reading the same report over and over. I asked myself what he could possibly be covering up, or stalling for. Then I decided maybe *he* wasn't."

"That's why you wanted to X it yourself?"

"Correct," I acknowledged,

"which is why I requisitioned a paraling drug kit from your cabin."

"Which is why our pinochle game got interrupted by a belly-ache."

"Yes, I paid the comm man to get sick."

"An unsupervised X by a non-p.l. is never without its dangers."

"So I'd heard, but that's why Personnel is full of ex-Guardsmen—to sponge up the puddles of trouble before someone steps in them."

"Or turn them into lakes," he reflected. "So what about Scarle? What *did* happen?"

"Like the report says, he went off his rocker and tried to kill us all. I had to shoot him in self defense."

"Do you remember doing it?"

"Sort of. . . Anyway, that's what the report says."

He surrounded me.

"You were inside his mind." Each word weighed equal to its neighbor.

"Yes, it's all in the report."

"And you were with him at the time he became unbalanced."

"That's right."

"And you came away thinking *you* were Scarle, after you had killed him."

"That also is correct. The report said it was a neurotic identification brought on because I was cathecting at the onset of trauma."

"I know, I wrote it. But I'm seldom happy just to stick a label on something, and that's what I did. It's been over two months now, and I may not see you again for a long while. I'd like to re-examine my diagnosis before we say good-bye."

"Okay, we're both in a condition where I can tell you what really happened and blame it on the drinks if you ever ask me again."

SO I told him. Do you remember that water cruise we took a couple years ago, on Jansen, and that one island we stopped at, the one where you talked me into playing a limbo game with the kids? I was bending over backwards to please and I fell flat on my backside in the process, but I made a more memorable impression than if I had succeeded. I know Hale did not believe the entire story—I could hear his gears grinding—but he was impressed. More than I had anticipated.

I told him how I had accompanied Scarle back into the lands beneath the land that day, swinging along to a monomaniac Guard marching tune calculated to assure mental privacy. I had washed out of Circle training in the second month myself, because of a concept-blurring tendency. I am sure you are not aware that I had even attempted

it(I probably did it because of the name), and I could see Hale recalling my personnel record and seizing upon it as an explanation for my story—an explanation for what had really saved me. He was wrong, but it did not matter. He still believed much of what I said.

Nearly anybody can achieve a percentage of X under optimum conditions; I always can, and it is higher than average. This time it was sufficient.

The nimbus of our flicker-lights was not a far-reaching thing, consequently the Queried (?), as always, remained a part of the darkness. Like a shaded Medusa, she hovered before us, and we could feel her presence and sense her exchanges with Scarle. The voices of winds and grasses and the sounds of cellars and the cries of high cables and the monotonous commenting of seashells buzzed at the bottom of our auditory threshold and worked occasional fractured multiwords, without genuine context. An illicit and indefinable feeling of not being wanted crept through me as I prepared the injection.

"... Not take . . . les nouritures(?) . . . sadly . . . and stealing, Romany(?) . . . go . . . all things—pause—corpus meum . . . why? Brigand from the stars . . . perhaps—"

And my head swam and I was

inside and no one had noticed and the night was cool.

I stood there feeling like a photographic negative of Scarle. Object rained upon subject, a plethora of stimuli waterfall-upon my mind, but I kept my mind quiet. Perhaps it was the intensity of the communication that caused them to overlook my presence. I eased into Scarle's mind and read there the fascination with what is impossible.

Whatever it was in the tunnel, it was not a giant ant in Scarle's mind/my mind. We were talking with a lovely, yellow-tressed young lady who reminded me of yourself, Lisa, and she was obviously fascinated with our person. We were linked with a host of criminal concepts only recently learned in the society of the tunnels, and never before encountered on an intimate basis. She was in love with Scarle/me/us, and her sadness was great.

"I cannot do to you," she said, "what I did with the others; and you, more than any of them, are that which threatens us. If Earth prevails here, as it has on Malmson, Bareth, and the other worlds you have visited, we will be as doomed as they. Yet, you have lived by their principle of thievery, and I cannot hate you for it. Let us talk of other things and postpone our final conflict. Tell me again of your looting days . . ."

IT was not then that the part of Scarle that was me suddenly got the shakes and was noticed. It was a moment later, when my nervous introspecting revealed that we/I(?) returned the creature's sentiments. Then it was all over in a surrealist kaleidoscope that I watched through more eyes than I care to count.

The Ring works both ways. Or Rings. She wore the stronger one. Ours was a candybox imitation.

Communication was an incidental virtue of Solomon's ring, remember? Its main function was the controlling of malevolent entities, of bending their actions to the wearer's will, of impressing *their* wills with commands like hot irons . . .

She seized Scarle's/mine/our (?) mind, with a hurricane of mixed emotions backing the assault.

"Kill them all!" came the order.

I guess Brown was the first to sense what was happening, because he flicked on a light beam.

And she stood there, flinching at the light—a gigantic, rainbow-winged gargoyle, with antennae like black seaweed surfaced on a stormlit ocean crest.

That is doubtless what saved us all. Despite the command, Scarle and I were frozen by the shock of seeing—of seeing the truth that your symbol had con-

cealed, as the music was torn from our mind by the light, and the order roaring again after the flash, like a thunderclap:

"Kill them!"

That was when we went mad. I saw Scarle through my eyes and the cathedral windows of *her* eyes, and myself through that same colored glass and Scarle's eyes, and I/we saw her, both, and we obeyed the command.

There was gunfire and I dropped down the pipe of a titanic organ, vibrating to something that I might have been able to recognize if I had had the time to listen.

The time passed, and one day I could hear again.

The command had worked divisively. Although Scarle and I had been one in mind, the ordered "Kill them!" had affected two separate nervous systems, and I beat him to the draw. It was that simple, although I do not remember doing it.

I collapsed from the psychic drain before I could kill anyone else; or possibly it had been the light that slowed her, or the sudden death of Scarle. She lost her control, retreated; and the crew retreated, both bearing their casualties.

IN that brief time when our mind(s) were flooded, refuge for sanity was found in the men-

tal foxholes Hale had dug. I crouched beneath neurotic breakwalls, communicating with Oedipus of things long ago and far away in the streets of Fenster. I was alternately depressed or elated as my fathers beat me or bought me candy, and always resentful, and always Scarle, and always wanting to know what they were thinking so I could know which way to jump, and always wanting to make them like me even though I hated their guts, and always, Lisa, I remembered mother and the thirteenth card of the Major Arcana—the Boney Reaper, Death—whom I feared most of all, but had to challenge every day in order to be big and not need anybody, and he was the navigator of the Steel Eel, but I was the captain.

It took more than a month for me to begin being myself again, but differently. Scarle, the man who had enjoyed stealing whenever he could get away with it, would have been pleased with his last theft. He had stolen part of my mind and left me a portion of his, in passing. He took with him a measure of my devotion to the policies of the Circle, and he left me with a calculated, anti-social quality which I have decided is a virtue.

I/we feel that the ant queen was right, that i/We were right after Malmson, and that the Temple is being maintained upon

a foundation of spurious principles, the walls shored up at an inconceivably dear cost—the racial integrity of a thousand alien peoples. For this reason, I have decided to rebel. The transference left me the means of doing so. I am now a paraling in my own right, and the encounter with your image on the world called the Butcher left me with the full range of the Ring's powers. I, too, can compel actions, alter thoughts, require affections.

Hale said to me: "Do you feel like Scarle any more?"

And I said: "I am Billy Scarle."

And then I said: "It may well be that he imprinted—" right in step with the same words as they emerged from Hale's mouth.

The Machiavelli eyes, like black circles painted on ice cubes, sought my own for an explanation.

"I am Billy Scarle," I repeated, "as well as myself. He lurks at the bottom of my mind and jeers at the facade of morality with which the Circle masks the piracies of Earth. He indicates, too, that he was almost executed for similar acts on a smaller scale."

"I don't give a hoot about politics and policies," said Hale, "but you are a psychiatric curiosity. Once in a lifetime—something like this—a parapsych

transference of personality traits and abilities! We are going to write a paper!"

"We are going to eat dinner," I said.

"But we've already eaten—"

"In the lighter gravitation of Luna two meals set as easily as one—and we're big people, with stomach for lots of things, aren't we?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"King Solomon had a ring," I told him, "and communication was not its only end. It could be used to compel the obedience of every demon in existence, and I, Billy Scarle, wear that ring around my mind like an emotional chastity belt. You are on the side of the demons, Hale. Not all of the demons are malevolent, though, and many can be put to work building the Temple properly. I am recruiting you to spread the dogma of Many Mansions, and to fill them with an interstellar brotherhood. I am going to steal your philosophy, like a magpie, and leave you another in its place."

The Seal of Solomon became a hot scalpel in my mind, and after awhile I said, "What are we going to have for dinner?" and he said, "How about steaks?"

THAT, Lisa, is the story of my dinner/s last night (I think it was last night; I am not back on the Earth time-scale yet). I left

Doctor Hale assured of my complete recovery from the Scarle-neurosis, and I caught the next shuttle for Earth. Earth fills the viewport while I write these lines, my darling, as my mind fills with double memories of you. I believe that Scarle loved you, as much as he was capable of loving anything, and I know that I always have. I shall know in a few hours which of us (if either) may have evoked similar feelings in you—that, when we talk of the past in the wordless pentagrams of our profession. I wish to enlist you in my crusade, also—I say, "enlist", not "induct". I believe that I have almost a century of productive time before me. With your able assistance I could use that time changing the minds of the men who are the mind of Earth and the soul of its policies. If you decline, it shall only cost you an hour out of your memory. You were such a fine recruiter, and there is something to what Hale says about charisma.

If I try to go it on my own I may trip up soon—but, either way, I *will* have a go at it—and I have prepared this lengthy proposal and invitation (which I shall post after landing) in order to apprise you of the circumstances which have brought me here, as well as my feelings for you. I probably overestimate the

time that will be allotted me; the choice, though, of a short and magnificent life selling igloos on Mercury has its appeal. I believe that you, also, are fascinated by impossibilities. (And remember what happened to Troy?)

Therefore, I shall time the solid postal transmissions in a few moments and transport my-

self accordingly. By the time you have read this far I shall be but moments away.

Please consider the future, and please be afraid. In a few moments you too, shall meet the Butcher. He is probably outside now, with a ring for you.

Open the door and let him in.

Love and kisses,
Solomon/Scarle

THE END

(Continued from page 95)

in, "but if you do, Father, I'll leave you again, just as I did when I was captured on that liner. But this time I'll get away, and if they try to bring me back, I'll kill myself."

The old man looked betrayed.

Roxella tapped him lightly on the nose and said, "Oh, Father, stop being such a rotter yourself. You'll see, things will work out just fine. And you won't have to spend all your time with those fat miserable slugs from the other side of Moneyville. You'll *love* Billy for a son-in-law."

The girl kissed him lightly on his head, and Billy stood

up. He tossed the gun to the pixie-man. "Here. We understand each other now, I think."

They started to walk to the droptube.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for a place to live. In Slobtown," Roxella said.

They disappeared down the shaft, and the pixie-man remained sitting in his crazily geometric chair.

"You don't know who to trust these days," he moaned. "The world has gone mad, mad, mad!"

But he was wrong.

The world was just beginning to regain its sanity.

THE END

*Rama meant Immortal, and it had
been a word of terror for so
long that no amount of time
could erase the meaning."*

see THE ROAD TO 'SINHARAT'
by Leigh Brackett

